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University of London

**REHEARSING FOR LIFE: THEATRE FOR
SOCIAL CHANGE IN KATHMANDU, NEPAL**

Monica Mottin

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Monica Mottin

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to examine the production and performance of theatrical activities aiming at bringing about social change in both development and political intervention. My investigation began with Aarohan Theatre Group, a Kathmandu-based professional company and subsequently extended to Maoist cultural troupes. I have taken a critical perspective considering theatre as a mode of socio-cultural practice embedded in the wider socio-political reality. Thus, I present an account of what it means to do theatre and live by theatre in contemporary Nepal, from 2005 to 2006, through the artists' perspective. Co-performance, that is participation in some performances, complemented participant observation as a methodology.

Theatre provides an outstanding context for both social reflection and symbolic action. In a manner similar to ritual, theatrical performances can become deliberate means for both constructing and de-constructing power and symbolically legitimizing or de-legitimizing authority.

In Nepal, modern artistic and political theatre developed side by side. First, an historical overview of its development will set the scene for understanding the role played by theatrical performances in the years 2005-2006. In fact, during my fieldwork, history repeated itself. The restrictions on civil rights imposed by the king through the 2005 Emergency affected both street and proscenium theatre activities. Subsequently, ethnographic descriptions will illustrate the theatrical apparatus that the king employed to legitimize his power and how autocracy was similarly resisted and fought against in the streets through theatrical forms of protest and street theatre, *lok tantrik natak*. I will then narrow my focus to a specific form of participatory street performance, *kachahari natak*, to describe how it was adopted and adapted in Nepal and how the theatre group developed as an organization. In conclusion, I will draw comparisons between different forms of 'theatre for social change', *kachahari natak*, *lok tantrik natak* and Maoist cultural programmes.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Research background and key questions

This research focuses on *kachahari natak*, the Nepali adaptation of a participatory kind of street theatre known as Forum Theatre (see Chapter one section 2.2. and Chapter four). Found all over the world, Forum Theatre is one of the dramaturgical techniques that Brazilian director Augusto Boal¹ systematized into a methodology called the Theatre of the Oppressed (1979). It is employed in several kinds of projects such as community development, personal or organizational development, advocacy and therapy. In Nepal Forum Theatre is used in development. However, I do not consider *kachahari* theatre as just a 'product of development', but rather as a form of popular culture that can be understood — to borrow from Bourdieu's (1990) practice-based approach — as pertaining 'not only to the patterning or internal structures of the cultural productions' (Holland and Skinner 1995:280) but also to the 'contexts of meaning and action' (Ibid.) in which they are produced and performed. As a result, both the political and aesthetic/performative contexts have been taken into account (Kershaw 1992:5). Rather than directing attention to performance texts or reception, I looked for a pattern of cultural practices, such as other forms of contentious performances

¹ Augusto Boal is a theatre actor, director and activist born in Rio de Janeiro in 1931. After studying dramatic arts at Columbia University, New York, he engaged in classical theatre and experimented with theatre applied to adult education. He theorized and searched for techniques that could enhance the audience participation in performance, and gathered them in the *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979). Tortured for his cultural activities during the Brazilian military regime, in 1971 he exiled first to Argentina and then to France where he remained to live and work for fifteen years. In 1992 Boal was elected as vereador (city councillor) in Rio de Janeiro. Through his theatre group, he discussed in the streets issues that citizens were facing and their suggestions were proposed as law. Boal thus theorized and initiated the Legislative Theatre movement. Augusto Boal died in Rio de Janeiro in 2009 (for more on Boal see Babbage 2004 as well as Boal's own writings).

questioning the social order, continuities and innovations upon well-known themes and strategies, as well as the artists' changing professional identities. Focusing on the artists' point of view instead of the audience's (cf. Hastrup 2004), I want to analyse theatre as 'not literature that happens to be on stage' but rather as a 'moving life force' (Berkoff in Hastrup 2004:29). To sum up, I have moved beyond a formalist analysis conceptualizing theatre as independent of its social and political environment (Kirby 1987), to regard theatrical performances both as a 'cultural construct' as well as 'a means of cultural production' (Kershaw 1992:5). Taking this perspective, theatre-making becomes a 'mode of socio-cultural practice' (Zarrilli 2002:1) rather than a simple 'tool'. Thus it is not analysed as an 'innocent or naive activity separate or above and beyond reality, history, politics or economics' (Ibid.).

The first objective of my thesis is, therefore, to outline how both everyday social problems and macro-political conflict situations can be both represented and challenged through drama-based performances. It arose out of the particular circumstances of fieldwork. The critical political moment in which it took place offered a wide range of oppositional performance-based activities, such as street dramas, highly theatrical street protests, and cultural programmes which complemented the initial objective of analysing development theatre. For this reason, I have considered both political theatre (Chapters two and three with comparative sketches of Maoist performance in Chapter four) and development theatre (Chapter four). In particular, I have focused on the interplays between politics and performance during the years 2005-06. My argument will be that representational performances can both construct and deconstruct political power because of the peculiar space they create (see Chapters two and three). This also requires detailing the relationship between theatre groups, government institutions and donors; examining the internal organization of a theatre group to see how it impacts on the performance practices (Chapter five); observing how theatre can facilitate social change in the context of development intervention in Kathmandu (Chapter four), as well as recognising its limitations. While acknowledging the relevance of reception research and the productive role of any theatre audience (Bennet 1997), I have focused my work only on the production and performance stages in order to analyse how the theatre group organization, the artists' identities and expectations, the political and social context affect the technical choices that allow for different degrees of audience agency. My research is therefore situated at the crossroads between anthropology, theatre and development.

First, the anthropological critique of development, in particular the shift from 'whether' to 'how' development works provides the background against which to situate theatrical work as an intervention for social change (Long and Long 1992; Mosse 2003, 2005a). This involves revealing the complex agency and interests of the different actors involved in the processes, as well as the

necessity of taking into account the 'back stage' of the different agendas (Mosse 2005a; Heaton-Shrestha 2001, 2002). Mosse (2005a) has described development as representation. He explains how the success of development projects is produced by the 'control over the interpretation of events' (Ibid. 8). In order to perform the 'drama of social change', 'development projects need interpretative communities' (Ibid.). Mosse continues, 'they have to enrol a range of supporting actors with reasons 'to participate in the established order as if its representations were reality' (Sayer 1994:374 cited in Li 1999:298-9).

Second, Boal's research on theatre for social change and especially his techniques of Forum Theatre (1979; 1992; 1995; 1998; 2006; Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1994; Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 2006) offer an interesting perspective through which to study social reality and the way in which real life conflicts and oppressions can be expressed and challenged via the stage. Through Forum Theatre techniques the boundaries between fiction and reality may become blurred. Words can become actions, but actions that are simultaneously 'real' but not in 'real' situations. Actions are embedded within the assumed 'fiction' of the stage. While critics see participatory development as concealing power behind representation, and introducing 'real' power into the a-political theatre of participations, Boal uses a parallel shift between reality/play and on/off stage with the audience themselves in order to challenge power (see Chapter four).

Third, the anthropological study of theatre, expanded in the wider field of performance studies (Schechner 1988; 2002; Bial 2004) provides the 'lens' through which to understand the experience of playing real life on a 'stage' and having the possibility of experimenting with different 'scripts'. The work of Victor Turner (1969; 1974; 1982; St. John 2008) concerning the interplay between ritual, theatre and everyday life, his theory of 'social dramas', concepts of the liminal/liminoid, of *communitas* as well as his last works on the anthropology of experience and performance (1985; 1986) are central to my analysis. They provide a framework within which to observe development and political theatre as a place in which conflictual practices, relationships, and roles may be examined, and where possible resolutions may be articulated (Chapters two, three, and four). Turner's research is linked to Goffman's on the presentation of the self in everyday life and the framed structure of behaviour (Goffman 1959; Trevino 2003). Roles, behaviours and social practices can be regarded as 'scripts' that are performed every day. The theatrical space may become a place for reflexive awareness in which the 'actions' that make up the 'scripts' can be distanced, isolated, magnified, brought closer and, in some cases, questioned, contested and changed, in ways similar to what Schechner describes as 'restored behaviour' (1985; 1988; 2002). The dramatic metaphor has often been employed to describe social life (cf. Burke 1945; Turner 1982; 1984; Goffman 1959) and anthropologists have documented its spectacular qualities (Cohen 1981, Geertz 1980, Turner 1974).

The lack of extensive anthropological studies on theatre and spectacle *per se* pointed out by Beeman (1993:370) is being filled by the recent work of anthropologists (Hastrup 2004; Seizer 2005; Barber 2000) and theatre researchers using qualitative methodologies (Lange 2005; Edmondson 2007). Studies from Theatre Anthropology (Barba 1991; 1995) initiated by theatre practitioners in the attempt to de-contextualize the art of acting and understand the universal, 'natural' dimension of the performers' work are particularly interesting for anthropological theory. These have, in fact, stressed the peculiar role of theatre as the place specialized in 'actions'. Hastrup (1994; 2004) extends these ideas into the analysis of everyday life and highlights how most cultural knowledge is stored in actions and in embodied patterns of experience. This approach then echoes Bourdieu's theory of practice and his concepts of *habitus*, *hexis* and *doxa* (1990). As a result, even oppressive roles and behaviours are considered to have a strong corporeal component. Embodied through repetition, they can be challenged through dialogic and relational modes. In chapter four I will describe how different interpretations and practices of Forum Theatre techniques can affect audience participation, the possibility of embodying different roles on stage and the degree of reflexivity that the performance can trigger off.

Fourth, the anthropology of power provided the *fil rouge* to understand how theatre and the theatrical mode can undo and expose the invisible workings of politics. Starting from Lukes' radical view of power (2005) I have taken into account literature on art and politics to understand how art shapes political conceptions (Edelman 1995). Ankersmit (1996) suggested a focus on the notion of 'political' representation. He explains that representation always presents us with an 'aesthetic gap' between the represented and the representation. In this aesthetic gap legitimate political power and political creativity originates (Ibid.). And Kertzer's study (1988) of public political performances and rituals showed how an effective use of ritual is crucial in the success of both conservative and revolutionary political groups.

This ethnographic study will therefore offer insights into the articulation of social conflict and change through theatre in Nepal. It will contribute, first to anthropological theory on agency (Ahearn 2001; Skinner 1998; Hastrup 2004) and social action achieved by means of representation (Hastrup 2004). The research demonstrates how social agency and creativity work in different forms through theatrical performances and reveals how 'newness' (Hastrup 2001; Liep 2001; Hallam and Ingold 2007) may enter the social world. This research positions itself against the typical narrative of development which characterizes Nepal in terms of 'lack', and which downplays what Nepal has plenty of, that is, multitudinous forms of cultural expression (Pigg 1992; 1993; 1996; Shrestha 1993; Adhikari 1996; Dixit 1997; Des Chenes 1996). Theatre is an interesting starting point because it is universal, shared by both so-called developed and underdeveloped countries. The latter are mainly

known for their poverty, illiteracy and underdevelopment rather than for their art and theatre. For this reason, I want to draw attention to what goes unnoticed in the hegemonic discourse of development, that is the lively cultures and arts of Nepal. Nepali art is often objectified as locus of 'traditional' rituals or underdevelopment while little space is given to contemporary creativity in literature and language (Hutt 1991; 1997). Second, the study contributes to the anthropological critique of development, studying the appropriations of development practices (Mosse 2003, 2005; Heaton-Shrestha 2001, 2002). Third, it offers an anthropological analysis of social change in Nepal at a critical moment of political transition (Ahearn 2001; Adams 1998; Liechty 2003; Skinner, Holland and Pach III 1998); as well as (fourth) a specific ethnographic account of *kachahari* theatre with particular regard to the recently established area of Nepali theatre studies, about which no long term account is yet available and only one book about its history has been published in English (Subedi 2006). Fifth, it is a contribution to the anthropology of protest (Jasper 1999), and also to the anthropology of organizations (Gellner and Hirsch 2001).

2. Theoretical framework

Doing is the best way of saying
José Martí, poet (cited in Boal 1998)

In this section I will first draw the points of (dis)connection between theatre and social reality, emphasizing how ambiguity and reflexivity allow for the aesthetic place to become a transformative place. I will then briefly introduce the key concepts guiding the use of theatre for social change. Then, I will move from thematic and regional considerations to discuss theatre for social change in South Asia, with a short background to Nepali theatre, providing the context for the following chapters. A methodological section will conclude the chapter.

2.1. Theatre, acting and life: 'altered states' of consciousness and transformation

Theatre is two human beings, a passion and a platform
Lope de Vega (cited in Boal 1995:16)

While essentially different, life and theatre reflect each other. For a long time theatre was regarded, as Shakespeare said, as 'a mirror up to nature': on the one side reality, on the other fiction. Sometimes the boundaries between the two are highly charged and blurred. Theatricality enters 'real life' and 'real life' claims existence on the stage. Western theatrical research is moving more and more forcefully away from concepts of 'mimesis' and 'representation' of the social reality (cfr. Barba 1991; 1995; Grotowski 1968). Reality TV has seen a rapid rise and has had enormous success in the West. It is 'replacing' theatre as a site of 'representation' of 'real life'. In these shows the boundaries between reality and fiction fade, providing people with a space in which their 'vicarious' ways of imagining and playing themselves, their emotions and their dilemmas can be enacted (Andrejevic 2003).

Turner (1982) draws attention to the interplay between 'acting in everyday life and everyday life in acting'. 'Acting' can take place in ordinary or extraordinary time, can be associated to sincerity or pretence. 'Acting is therefore both work and play, solemn and ludic, pretence or earnest, our mundane trafficking and commerce and what we do or behold in ritual or theatre' (Turner 1982:102). Turner interestingly analyzed the etymology of the verb 'to act' and other related words:

The very word 'ambiguity' is derived from the Latin *agere* 'to act' for it comes from the verb *ambigere*, 'to wander', *ambi-* 'about, around' + *agere*, 'to do' resulting in the sense of having two or more possible meanings, 'moving from side to side', 'of doubtful nature'. In both major senses, doing deeds and performing, it is indispensable to mental health; as William Blake said: 'He who nourishes desires but Acts not, breeds Pestilence', a doublet 'Proverb of Hell' to, 'Expect Poison from standing Water'. In Western languages, action has also the flavour of contestation. *Act*, *agon*, *agony* and *agitate* are all derived from the same Indo-European base **ag-*, 'to drive', from which came the Latin *agere*, to do, and the Greek *agein*, 'to lead'. In Western (Anglo-European) culture, work and play both have this driving, conflictive character (Ibid. 193).

Everyday life is made up of actions and theatre, the place of 'action', is the human language *par excellence* employing verbal and physical devices: some people 'make' theatre but everybody 'is' theatre (Boal 1998:7) in the sense that everybody has the 'capacity to observe ourselves in action' (Ibid.). Boal points out that 'the being becomes human when it discovers theatre' and that 'the difference between humans and other animals resides in the fact that we are capable of being theatre' (Ibid.). In other words, what distinguishes 'life' and 'theatre', 'living' and 'acting' is the reflexivity triggered off by the process of performance.

Sometimes the power of theatre is limited to the power of the actor's presence and persuasion. This vision is based on the assumption that the spectator is a passive recipient of a show, taken away from 'reality' despite or against their willpower, that the spectator is somehow cheated by

the magic. This backs the concept of identification and catharsis upon which what Boal calls 'bourgeois theatre' is based.² This mechanism undoubtedly works. Boal himself, who rejected any kind of cathartic involvement and preferred a distancing Brechtian theatre founded on reflection, came to re-evaluate the emotional identification in his later work (1995). However, another conceptualization of the power of theatre and of the relationship between actor/spectator has guided my work. It is clearly defined in Boal's words:

'What kind of theatre? The theatre which is, in its most archaic sense, our capacity to observe ourselves in action. We are able to see ourselves seeing! This possibility of our being simultaneously Protagonist and principal spectator of our actions, affords us the further possibility of thinking virtualities, of imagining possibilities, of combining memory and imagination – two indissociable psychic processes – to reinvent the past and to invent the future. Therein resides the immense power with which theatre is endowed' (Boal 1998:7)

Such a vision of the theatrical art assumes agency from the spectator that is involved in the construction of meaning. This is the principle upon which Boal's Forum Theatre is based and from which Nepali *kachahari* theatre is derived (see Chapter four). Boal's daring research consisted in using theatre to break through the 'mirror' offered by theatre itself and thus challenge 'reality':

Hamlet says in his famous speech to the actors that theatre is a mirror in which may be seen the true image of nature, of reality. I wanted to penetrate this mirror, to transform the image I saw in it and to bring the transformed image back to reality: to realise the image of my desire. I wanted it to be possible for the spect-actors in Forum Theatre to transgress, to break the conventions, to enter into the mirror of a theatrical fiction, rehearse forms of struggle and then return to reality with the images of their desires (Boal 1998:9-10)

It is the person, as 'bodily presence' that is the 'locus – the pre-text – of action' (Hastrup 1995:80). Hastrup also emphasizes how action is not conceivable as a mental category but is materialized and expressed by a 'body-in-life' (Barba cited in Hastrup 1995:80) the body of the dramatic actor, that is 'more than a body merely alive' (Hastrup 1995:80).

A theatrical performance is an 'embodied reflexion'. Reflexivity is described as the 'consciousness about being conscious, thinking about thinking' (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982) and is a term used in many disciplines. In an attempt to delve into the issues that would lead to the 'reflexive turn' in anthropology, Myerhoff and Ruby (1982) explain that 'reflexivity generates heightened awareness and vertigo, the creative intensity of a possibility that loosens us from habit and custom and turns us back to contemplate ourselves just as we may be beginning to realize that we have no

² For 'bourgeois theatre' Boal intends a theatre where the division between audience and spectators is clear-cut (1979).

clear idea of what we are doing' (Ibid. 1) and that 'reflexive [...] describes the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself: subject and object fuse' (Ibid). 'Reflexivity' rather than 'reflectivity' can function as a trigger. As Schutzman *et al.* put it (2006:77), 'reflective images are analogous to looking into a mirror and seeing an 'accurate' representation, i.e. the mirror image game in the Theatre of the Oppressed. Conversely, reflexive images are those [...] wherein multiple representations are created through deliberate distortions (such as exaggeration, caricature, resonance) and utilized for interpretative purposes'.

Reflexivity can appear in many forms of human communication and can be individual and collective, private and public. My thesis will deal with different forms of collective and public reflexive actions, some spontaneous, others planned. Victor Turner suggests that '[t]he community [...] seeks to understand, portray, and then act on itself, in thought, words and deeds...public reflexivity takes on the shape of a performance' (in Ruby and Myerhoff 1982:17). In other words, a group 'formally steps out of itself, so to speak, to see itself, and is aware of doing so' (Ibid.)

The aesthetic space created by the performance acts as a 'magnifier': brought closer and intensified, human actions can be better examined (Boal 1995: 27). Moreover, Boal defines the aesthetic place as 'plastic', the same substance of dreams with the difference that it has a physical dimension (Ibid. 20). He adds that it is a place in which memory and imagination can be freed (Ibid. 21). Playfulness and ambiguity – when the boundaries between the 'real' and the 'fictional' world are blurred - allow for the challenging or breaking of the 'frames', of established and oppressive relations and behaviours. It is the distance between the self and other, the witness and the actor, the hero and the hero's story (Ruby and Myerhoff 1982: 2), and the manipulation of this distance along with the margins between 'fiction' and 'reality' that allow for the representation to challenge reality through reflexivity. In other words, paraphrasing Babcock (1980), Rudy and Myerhoff explain that

[I]n order to know itself, to constitute itself as an object for itself, the self must be absent from itself; it must be a sign. Once this operation of consciousness has been made, consciousness itself is altered; a person or society thinks about itself differently merely by seeing itself in this light (Ibid. 1982:2).

Occasions for societies to reflect upon themselves are present everywhere. They take the form of celebrations, collective ceremonies, rites of passage, rituals, public performances, and 'regularly engineered crises' (Ibid.). However, Ruby and Myerhoff point out that

[t]hese interpretations do not necessarily call attention to themselves as interpretations. Often they parade as other versions of 'reality', no matter how fabulous. They masquerade as different versions of truth into which individuals may come and go without realizing how contrived it all is. Rituals in particular may generate sentiments that mostly discourage

reflexivity, requiring a mindless and frenetic, repetitive activity that keeps the body too busy to allow the mind to criticize. This occurs even while the event may be precariously fiddling with the frames, mirrors, masks, reversals, screens, clowns, transvestites, and all the other commentators that threaten the sanctity of the order of things being presented. (Ibid.)

Heathcote (2008) reports that psychologists define actors as 'productive schizophrenics' because '[t]hey productively live a double truth for other people, not for themselves only; they try to produce a change of view, attitude, awareness, and understanding in other people' so that the audience can receive 'reflective energy' (Ibid. 2008:201). Turner reminded us that conflict characterizes both work and play (1982:193). But conflict is also the essence of theatre. In Nepal, one of the reasons given for a play being bad is that 'there is no conflict'.³ Thus the absence of conflict cannot produce good theatre. Rajkumar, an actor from Aarohan Theatre Group⁴, explains the origin of theatre saying that the praise that human beings gave to the gods to communicate with them and ask for rain or food was itself 'theatre'. Human beings and god thus established a 'relationship' and conflicts were born out of human fears, 'and where there is conflict there is something to show, there is something to say. And if there is something to say, that place is theatre' (Interview, January 2006). Conflict, religion, relations, and communication are the key themes emerging from Rajkumar's narrative. Conflict is recognised also in the West as the essence of theatre, as Boal makes clear.

The philosopher Hegel replies: 'The essence of theatre is the conflict of free wills! That is to say: a character is a will in flux, a desire in search of satisfaction, but does not obtain its object immediately: it is the exercise of a will which collides and conflicts with other, equally free, but contradictory wills. Nothing more than this is essential to the theatre: not sets, nor costumes, nor music nor buildings — without all of these, theatre can still be made, even without a theatre, but not without conflict (Boal 1998:57)

In Forum Theatre real life conflicts and problems are represented. What about the role of conflict in real life? Turner claims that 'disturbances of the normal and regular often give us greater insight into the normal than does direct study' (Ibid.). Conflict became a *topos* in this research. Besides observing how theatre dramatized a conflict or a crisis (Chapter two, three and four), I also analysed critical and conflictual moments in the establishment of a theatre organization (Chapter five). Conflict and change are inexorably related to each other and to theatre (Boal 1998; Heathcote 2008). Often change takes place through conflict and conflict becomes an opportunity for creative change.

³ The actor used the English term 'conflict'.

⁴ The theatre group where I carried out most of my fieldwork, see section 2.3.5 of this chapter).

2.2. Theatre for social change

For Nadeem, the playwright associated with Ajoka Theatre in Pakistan,

'Street Theatre is the name given to those plays that are written with the express purpose of conveying some information to the public, raising their consciousness about some injustice being perpetrated against them – such as the plight of the labourers, the passage of repressive laws against poor women, etc. The plays should be short and portable, able to be performed in street corners, open courtyards, factory grounds, etc' (Nadeem quoted in Afzal-Khan 1997:47)

Safdar Hashmi's view is more radical. He defines street theatre as

'a militant political theatre of protest [whose] function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations.' (www.sahmat.org)

The location on the streets is not enough to define 'street theatre', be it political or social. It is therefore useful, at this point, to detail some of its different aesthetic and political practices.

2.2.1. Some definitions

'Theatre-for-development', 'theatre of the oppressed', 'theatre for liberation', 'popular theatre', 'people's theatre' (Srampikal 1994; van Erven 1988), 'community theatre', 'agit-prop', 'activist theatre', 'social theatre' are different approaches to 'applied theatre' (Thompson 2005; Prentki and Preston 2009), often performed in the streets. They may differ in procedure but frequently share a critical reflection on society which aims to lead to collective action to change repressive social or political situations. These different 'street theatres' are frequently backed by forms of Marxist ideology, inspired by Paulo Freire's pedagogy of liberation, dialogue and critical thinking (Edson 1996; Freire 2002), TIE (theatre in education) experiences (Nicholson 2009) and by popular, and realistic theatre (Brecht 1964; Prentki and Selman 2000). 'Popular theatre' (Srampikal 1994; Prentki and Selman 2000) is probably the general term that clusters together all the above-mentioned sub-genres. Yet, this concept itself needs clarification. For some scholars 'popular' indicates a theatre intended for the general public, including all classes of society. For others, the term popular defines a radical, political theatre of and for a working-class rather than a bourgeois audience (van Erven 1988). In general, it is a theatre that attracts traditionally non-theatre-going

audiences including labourers, peasants, students, and which presents itself as a cultural alternative to the dominant bourgeois theatre (van Erven 1988:5).

Having located street theatre as a form of 'popular theatre' rather than 'commercial theatre', audience and community participation can be used as analytical tools to distinguish between different forms. Progressively more participatory methodologies move the emphasis away from 'theatre as product' towards 'theatre as process' (Epskamp 2006), from 'the work', the material artistic product, to the 'working' (Schechner 1987:8), that is to the 'doing, the experiential exhilaration of 'being in'' (ibid.). After situating political and development theatre along the participatory continuum, I will then go into a more in-depth description of Forum Theatre as it is one of the forms I have observed during my fieldwork. A more thorough discussion of the issue of participation itself will be carried out in the next sub-section.

We can establish a continuum between various degrees of participation in street theatre performances, although the categories can themselves overlap:

—	PARTICIPATION	+
POLITICAL THEATRE		COMMUNITY THEATRE
AGIT-PROP		THEATRE-FOR-DEVELOPMENT
REVOLUTIONARY THEATRE		FORUM THEATRE

Table 1.1. Degrees of audience participation in theatrical performances.

'Political theatre' and 'theatre for liberation' (van Erven 1992) usually challenge wider political structures. The performers may belong or be connected to political parties, citizens' groups or support particular political viewpoints. The content may offer a protest against or critique of current events such as government, economic, or social policies. The performance may or may not include post-performance discussions, but there usually is a strong and clear agenda to support with not much space for audience questioning or participation in the construction of the performance. Similarly, 'agit-prop' is a militant form of art that is 'intended to emotionally and ideologically mobilize its audience to take a specific action regarding an urgent social situation' (Cohen-Cruz 1998:13). The key aesthetic elements are the use of portable sets, visually clear characterizations, emblematic or symbolic costumes and props, choral speaking, traditional music and character types familiar to spectators, and having ideological resonance with the public spaces or building where they are presented (ibid.). 'Revolutionary theatre' can be considered as another radical form of agit-prop,

advocating revolution and linked to revolutionary parties, like in the Maoist cultural programmes (Mottin 2010).

'Community theatre' (Epskamp 1989; Byam 1999) puts its emphasis on local and/or personal stories, rather than pre-written scripts. It may be first processed through improvisation and then collectively shaped into a theatrical production under the guidance of professional actors. The community residents both shape the story and perform. 'Popular theatre' and 'community theatre' often indicate activities outside the mainstream in Europe and North America (Prentki and Selman 2008:11). When they are located in 'developing countries', the same activities are often labelled 'theatre-for-development', thus revealing an ethnocentric bias (Ibid.). If community-based theatre and Forum Theatre are to be included in the wider concept of 'popular theatre', the diffusion of theatre-for-development and street theatre in general outside US and Europe suggests that the latter should also be considered as forms of popular theatre. Popular theatre can therefore be conceptualized in different ways: as culture, as a tool for communication (Mda 1993), as a tool for education, as an art form, as a process of self-empowerment (Boal 1979), as an instrument of cultural intervention (Kershaw 1992), as an opportunity for 'saying the unsayable' (Prentki and Seldon 2000:49), as life. Theatre, however, is first and foremost performance. And popular theatre, in particular, is about changing the world (Ibid.). This is its basic intention. 'How' to achieve social change may vary, as the examples in this section and the whole thesis will show.

'Theatre-for-development', TFD (Harding N.d.; Kidd N.d.; Salhi 1998; Epskamp 2006) was developed in the 1970s in Africa. This was the first form of theatre to enter the development discourse in the early 1980s, in the search for more participatory models of planned development where local culture could become an allied rather than a element of resistance to social change (Epskamp 2006). This term was coined in Botswana in 1973 (Byam 1999:25) to describe an approach that aimed to make 'the processes of drama-building accessible to people who can in turn use it as part of their access to development' (Harding n.d.:333). Events and characters were selected from real life. Their direct fictionalising and dramatizing with the local communities ideally aimed at leading to action in real life (Harding 1998:5).

'Theatre of the oppressed' (Boal 1979; 1992; 1995; 1998; 2006) includes a series of techniques for participatory theatre, among which is 'Forum Theatre'. Boal advocates an aesthetic transformation. He believes that what makes a performance really critical is neither the plot nor the dialogue but the structure itself: oppression is achieved through the separation between actors vs audience, lead actors vs chorus (Ibid. 1979). In fact, the process of identification that affects the spectator and generates catharsis does not produce effective changes in reality according to Boal. On the contrary, it reasserts the oppressive condition:

Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character. In the first case a 'catharsis' occurs; in the second, an awakening of critical consciousness; but the poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change – in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but is surely a 'rehearsal for the revolution' (Boal 1979: 122).

What Boal suggests is to turn the spectators in spect-actors, that is actors that take part in the dramatic action, but who are also creators of the drama, who are for the conception of the message (Boal 1979). Audience's participation becomes therefore a significant element in order to analyse how drama-based work can bring forward social change.

Boal wished to 'activate' the spectators by offering them the chance of entering the aesthetic space. 'Simultaneous dramaturgy' is the first attempt to break the barrier between actors and spectators, between fiction and reality. When the scene reaches a point of crisis the play is stopped and the spectators can verbally offer alternative solutions that the actors enact on the spot: 'the audience members 'write' and the actors 'perform' (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1995:238). However, telling someone to do something and actually doing it are two very different things. Boal recounts a famous example that transformed his theatre towards the even more participatory⁵ methodology of Forum Theatre. A woman in the audience became so outraged by the actor's inability to understand her suggestion that she went onto the stage and demonstrated what she meant through her own actions. Boal argues that:

when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place. On stage the actor is an interpreter who, in the act of translating, plays false (1995:7).

Trying to embody real-life dilemmas and enact possible solutions triggers off different involvement and emotions: for Boal 'doing' is different from 'talking about doing', 'representing' is different from 'being'.

In Forum Theatre a short play or short scenes based on everyday experience, and workshopped beforehand with some community members, are played once. They usually represent a situation in which the 'protagonist' is unable to react to an oppressive situation. Afterwards, the joker,

⁵ Boal emphasizes the importance of giving people the chance to 'participate', it is then their choice to actually being involved or not.

whom Boal calls the 'difficultator',⁶ explains to the audience that they will see the whole sequence again. They can stop it at any time, replace the 'protagonist' on the stage and try to experiment with a different solution. Different proposals are discussed and acted out. Boal therefore carried out a critique from within the form of drama, in which 'reality' is not only represented on the stage but also 'enters' the stage with the spect-actor acting a role which is similar to that which oppresses him/her in real life. In this way the distance but at the same time the overlapping of reality/fiction is used as a gateway to challenge oppression or discuss conflict situations. It is this tension that may allow both the understanding of embodied practices and their transformation: 'the act of transforming is already transformative: in the act of changing our image, we are changing ourselves, and by changing ourselves in turn we change the world' (Boal 2006:62)

Boal explains that theatre can be a 'rehearsal for revolution' where oppressed people can explore strategies for resistance. 'Within its fictitious limits the experience is a concrete one' (Boal 1979:140) for the participants and the cathartic⁷ effect is avoided. The drama creates a place where it should be 'legal'⁸ to see one's imagination acted out. As the performance develops, play and reality blur. According to Boal, 'the practice of these theatrical forms creates a sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfilment through real action' (Ibid. 142). The audience are not just 'spectators' of the performance but 'spect-actors' who act out their ideas on stage. The play is therefore open-ended, unfinished, opposite to the finished forms of 'bourgeois theatre' (Ibid. 142). What differentiates Theatre-for-Development from Forum Theatre is the fact that in the first some community members participate in the creation of a play that is, however, usually presented as a 'finished product' to the audience. In contrast, Forum Theatre is presented as an unfinished performance which is to be collectively and interactively completed by the audience during the performance itself.

Boal places a strong emphasis on the fact that oppressions are embodied and that they can be perceived physically. Though development projects often emphasize the verbally-dialogic aspect of Forum Theatre, interaction, critical thinking, action and fun, Boal has stressed the importance of a whole series of physical exercises and games that usually precede Forum Theatre.⁹ In Forum Theatre the body plays a central role as the emphasis is placed on 'embodying' alternative actions and possible solutions, not just verbally articulating them. In this way the dramatic work becomes a 'rehearsal for life'. Boal believes that the body is 'one's most essential tool in transforming physical

⁶ See Schutzman (2006:133-145) on 'jockeying'.

⁷ In *The Rainbow of Desire* (1995) Boal reshaped the meaning of catharsis.

⁸ The universal validity of the stage as a safe and legal place experimentation will be considered in Chapter four.

⁹ Image Theatre is one of these, in which the human body is used as a tool to represent feelings, ideas and relationships. The participants 'sculpt' others or use their own body to represent and reflect on a situation or an oppression. Image theatre exercises are often employed before Forum Theatre to create trust and provide 'visceral cues' (1999:3) about the themes that are being investigated.

sensations into a communicable language and altering everyday space into a theatrical arena, or an aesthetic space' (1991:3). The body becomes the principal means of expression. In fact, it is also the 'locus of the ideological inscriptions and oppressions' (Auslander in Schutzman 1991:124). This idea links with Hastrup's view of the body as a 'locus of agency': theatre can thus become a privileged mode of discussion and dialogue and can entertain the ideas of 'embodied patterns of experience' (Bourdieu 1990).

Kachahari natak derives from Forum Theatre. In Chapter four I will detail how Boal's theories are adapted to the Nepali context and how the techniques are thus transformed in the adaptation. In particular, I will focus on the production process and performance of a *kachahari* play. What emerges is that the workshop stage is cancelled and the interaction with the audience became more similar to traditional forms of street theatre, thus reducing the power of Forum Theatre to challenge oppressive embodied patterns of behaviour.

2.2.2. The crux of participation

Theatre practitioners (Harding 1999; Byam 1999; Kerr 1999; Epskamp 2006; Boal 2006; Prentki and Preston 2008) realized that community participation in a theatrical production was central to the awareness raising power of theatre. In other words, it was by 'doing theatre' rather than by 'watching' a theatrical performance that the 'power' of theatre could be deployed in its fullness. This marks the major distinction drawn by Epskamp (2006) between 'theatre as a process' and 'theatre as a product'. However 'liberatory in intention and highly desirable', achieving genuine participation is a complex activity fraught with difficulties (Rahnema 1999; Preston 2008; Breed 2008; Moclair 2008; Thornton 2008; Coutinho and Nogueira 2008)

The processual form of a theatrical production is a central point of analysis. At this stage, it will be interesting to draw a parallel with ritual. Turner argues that the processual form of a ritual is extremely significant as it becomes a kind of 'road map' to achieve certain goals.¹⁰ Furthermore, a ritual is transformative because it is sequenced. In Turner's formulation the steps in a ritual are irreversible (1982). Schechner shows how the typical seven-phase sequence of a theatrical production follows a pattern analogous to initiation rites. Following Van Gennep's categories: training,

¹⁰ I do not consider 'process' and 'map' as opposed notions rather than in dialectical tension in the same way as structure and agency conflate into practice (Bourdieu 1990).

workshop, rehearsal and warm-up —> rites of separation; the performance itself is liminal —> rites of transition; cool-down and aftermath are post-liminal —> rites of incorporation (Ibid. 20).

What is most interesting is that in Forum Theatre the direction of the process is reversed in comparison to what happens in proscenium theatre. In the latter, the workshop stage is followed by the rehearsals and the performance. In Forum Theatre, the repeated — to the extent of being embodied — practices of everyday life are the starting point which lead to the creative stage of 'workshop' and performance-forum where these elements are discussed and challenged.¹¹ So, the core of Forum Theatre becomes the workshop. The Forum is simultaneously both performance and a continuation of the 'workshop'. The process is not linear but cyclical. The sequence becomes: gathering information about a community (conflicts, practices)—> workshop to establish a skit —> performance and forum/workshop during the performance in which practices are challenged.

The way in which information about a specific issue is collected, and by whom, is very important. It can affect the performance itself. In the second and third phases possibilities of change are explored. Schechner claims that the workshop-rehearsal process is 'betwixt and between the fixed world from which material is extracted and the fixed score of the performance text' (1985:101).¹² In Forum Theatre, the workshop is the moment in which different ideas, behaviours, and roles are compared and discussed. Who participates in the different stages? Are they the same groups of people? This will be examined in Chapter four of this thesis. In the Forum stage, the different possibilities of solving those conflicts suggested by the spectator/spect-actor can be seen as 'restored behaviour':

Restored behaviour is living behaviour treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These 'strips of behaviour' (see Goffman) can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal system (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. [...] 'The practitioners of all these arts, rites and healings assume that some behaviours — organized sequences of events, scripted actions, known texts, scored movements — exist separate from the performers who 'do' these behaviours. Because the behaviour is separate from those who are behaving, the behaviour can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed. The performers get in touch with, remember, or even invent these strips of behaviour and then behave according to those strips, either by being absorbed into them (playing the role, going into trance) or by existing side by side with them (Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*). The work or restoration is carried on in rehearsals and/or in the transmission of behaviour from master to novice (Schechner 1985:35-36)

¹¹ Schechner describes the workshop phase as 'a deconstruction process, where the ready-mades of culture (accepted ways of using the body, accepted texts, accepted feelings) are broken down and prepared to be 'inscribed' upon (to use Turner's word). Workshop is analogous to the liminal-transitional phase of rituals. Rehearsals are the opposite of workshops. In rehearsal longer and longer strips of restored behaviour are arranged to make a new unified whole: the performance' (ibid 1985:99).

¹² The way in which the score of a *kachahari* theatre performance is 'fixed' will be discussed in Chapter four.

This idea is based on the assumption that 'restored' behaviour is 'out there' and distant from 'me'. In this way distance becomes a key element since it allows for 'behaviour' to be worked on, discussed and even changed. Similarly, Boal (1995:24) says that the theatrical stage creates a 'dichotomy' in which the actor presents the scene and simultaneously presents herself in the scene: in this way the 'behaviour' can be better analyzed and, if necessary, changed.

In the context of development when people are discussing their own lives and practices on the stage, distance should provide a 'safe' involvement, a 'protection' from the consequence and responsibility of the changes that are nonetheless rehearsed physically (see Chapter four). Schechner finds similarities in Van Gennep and Turner's idea of 'liminality' and 'subjunctive', Bateson's (1955) 'play frame', Stanislavski's (1936) use of 'magic if' as ways of projecting out of everyday reality and clicking into the imagination of different worlds, roles and practices. The use of 'as if' encourages the person to be in the circumstance represented on the stage, researching the physical environment, the effects, the relationships which will lead to an 'action' on stage and, possibly, in real life. Schechner draws an interesting parallel with Winnicott's ideas of transitional phenomena.

'Restored behaviour of all kinds – ritual, theatrical performances, restored villages, *agnicayana* – are 'transitional'. Elements that are 'not me' become 'me' without losing their 'not me-ness'. This is the peculiar but necessary double negativity that characterizes symbolic actions. While performing, a performer experiences his own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing the others. While performing, he no longer has a 'me' but has a 'not not me' and this double negative relationship also shows how restored behaviour is simultaneously private and social. A person performing recovers his own self only by going out of himself and meeting the others – by entering a social field. The way in which 'me' and 'not me', the performer and the thing to be performed, are transformed into 'not me ...not not me' is through the workshop-rehearsal/ritual process. This process takes place in a liminal time/space and in the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive character of the liminal time/space is reflected in the negative, antistructural frame around the whole process. This antistructure could be expressed algebraically: 'not (me...not me)'. (Schechner 1985:112)

The central aspect of performances is their transportive/transformative power. Transformation can take place in different ways. It can be permanent or not. It can affect the performers and the audience to different degrees. Bourgault suggests that the performances produced in Tfd projects in Africa sometimes approximate the feel, power and transformative capacity of ritual (1991).¹³ The relationship between the performer and the audience becomes central. Both can be transported or transformed. The first usually applies to aesthetic theatre, the second to ritual.

Turner argues that liminal phenomena change individuality, merging the identities of the actors with the action of the ritual, and therefore the cosmos and the society's belief about it. In this

¹³ No ethnographic description is provided to support this idea.

way the participants achieve flow, a sort of 'self-propelled' take off, which results in a transformation (Turner 1982:53). Turner also found that liminoid genres tended to heighten the sense of particularity of spectators by distancing audiences from actors and the stories depicted on stage. For this reason it was difficult for spectators to achieve flow. In his critique of traditional theatre Boal restores the possibility for spect-actors to achieve flow. If/how spectators/spect-actors are 'transformed' and/or 'transported' in a Forum Theatre performance will be addressed in the thesis.

Issues of participation and transformation are far more complex than I have pointed out so far. The artists' identity comes vigorously into play. For example, in the early projects of TFD in Africa, the Samaru projects in Nigeria and the Marotholi Travelling Theatre in Lesotho, the actors were university students coming from city universities and upper-class backgrounds. They could not act as catalysts and experienced a great social distance from the villagers they were working with. Though speaking in their own terms, the villagers could not recognize their voice in the plays (see Chapter four). What is tricky about this form of theatre is that its liberating power, if not properly used, can turn into the opposite, that is, a sort of oppressive propaganda about 'proper' ways of being and behaving,¹⁴ and 'facipulate'¹⁵ (Bourgault 2003:219) rather than empower. Practitioners have shown that manipulation can be very subtle and take different forms. In theory participatory theatre should be able to provide voice for the least empowered. In practice, dominant people do dominate, and as a result of their controlling the workshop the core issues of the less powerful are not faced (Bourgault *Ibid.*; Moclair 2008). The shift from 'giving people a voice' to 'message-oriented' to patronization is very subtle. The discovery of the right to speak, the ability to articulate a point of view and through performing, the freedom to explore and reveal another 'self' are considered central achievements (Harding 1998). However, Kidd points out that the limited amount of time available in the villages often allowed people to participate only rather than take control of the actions and planning. Moreover, the practitioners' 'preoccupations with deepening the understanding of the issues might make them "interventionist", imposing their own thinking rather than following villagers' analysis' (n.d.). Development participatory theatre practices parallel with participatory planning rituals like PRA and raise similar sets of questions (Mosse 2005a:75-102): To what degree do people have authority and control over the message and management of the performance? Whose issues are discussed? How does the community participate? How do the power relations within the community participants influence the process? There are also other unexpected effects of staging 'reality' that need to be taken into account. For example, constraints in expression or hegemonic factors may prevent some

¹⁴ This second form was often used in early AIDS-HIV prevention campaigns where instead of discussing gender relations people were 'taught' to use condoms.

¹⁵ Manipulate by facilitating; Carmen cited in Moclair (2008:162) talks instead of 'participation' when the process is manipulated to meet the objectives of a programme or 'manufacture' messages.

people from speaking; interests are themselves socially constructed: the extent to which a person can 'participate' needs to be investigated. As in PRA and participatory development, the word 'participation' has proved to be a very ambiguous term for politically correct discourses which hide a different reality (Cook and Kothari 2001). Does theatre need to be interactive to be really participatory? For example, Boal moved towards the participatory methodology of Forum Theatre described above after acknowledging the limitations of his being a 'theatre actor'. For example, he cites an experience of doing agit-prop theatre in a rural community. With his actors he incited peasants to revolt against their oppressors. Virgilio, an audience member convinced by the performance, asked the artists to pick up the guns and fight. Boal felt ashamed and had to reveal theirs were not weapons but theatrical props. This is how Boal remembers Virgilio's words and his reaction:

'So, when you true artists talk of the blood that must be split, this blood you sing about spilling – it's our blood you mean, not yours, isn't that so?'

'We are true to the cause, absolutely, but we are true artists not true peasants! Virgilio, come back, let's talk about it.... Come back' (Boal1995:3)

Boal realized that they were not following their own advice. He quotes Che Guevara: 'solidarity means running the same risks' (Ibid.). Boal admits he never again wrote plays that gave advice 'except on occasion when I was running the same risks as everyone else' (Ibid.). Political theatre (Chapter three), development theatre (Chapter four) and Maoist cultural performances (Chapter four) will raise challenging questions regarding the ethical consequences of performances (See Chapter four).

2.2.3. 'Street theatre' in South Asia

In this section, I would like to provide a short regional background to the theatrical activities I will describe later on regarding Nepal. For this reason, I have selected some examples of political and development theatre in India that present similarities to the Nepali experiences and in some way may have affected them. The origins of political theatre in India date back to the anti-British and anti-fascist struggles. Bhatia (2004) argues that theatre had a vital force in the struggle against colonial and postcolonial domination in India. From the second half of the 19th century, theatre was perceived

as a threat by the colonial administration because of its ability to influence the audience, to create and sustain community bonds, and raise awareness about social problems (Bhatia *ibid.*). Moreover, the methodology through which theatre worked was not easily accessible to the colonial authorities because of language, theatrical and spatial differences (*Ibid.* 7). One example is Mitra's *Neel-Darpan* (Indigo Mirror) written in 1860 and first staged in 1872. It was a proscenium production but it is considered as the first protest play in India. The play challenged the cruelty of the indigo planters in West Bengal. The contemporary street theatre scene in South Asia is complex and varied (Afzal-Khan 2005; Barucha 1983; 1998; 2000; Mohan 2004a; 2004b; Hashmi 1989; van Erven 1992; Epskamp 1989; Yarrow 2001; Srampikal 1994). Here I will just mention in turn some key theatrical experiments from India — the IPTA, Janam and Jana Sanskriti — in order to help locate the Nepali experiences.

The IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) was the first organized political theatre movement in India. Linked to the Communist Party, it falls within the Marxist tradition of cultural work that is expressed now in Nepal by the Maoist cultural programmes (Mottin 2010). The IPTA was active from 1943 until 1947 with a 'mass character' (Bhatia, 2004:90) and continued later through splinter groups but with less strength (Bhatia 2004; Bharucha 1983). The IPTA's teams infused popular traditional theatrical forms with political content and satire. They also adapted European dramas according to the audience's needs (Bhatia, 2004:87) to avoid the censorship (*cf.* Chapter two). Because the IPTA's activists were mostly middle-class intellectuals, unaware of the conditions of life in the villages, they had to learn the art of theatre from the people and faced language problems (Barucha 1983). According to Barucha, the early plays were urban in their perspective but impressive for their capacity to expose fascism and imperialism (*Ibid.*). This gap between centre and periphery existed also in Nepali street theatre (see Chapter two)

The IPTA performed for the masses (20,000 people) and made theatre available to those people that were excluded before. Sometimes workers or peasants participated in play scripting and acting (Bhatia 2004:85), thus making IPTA artists precursors of contemporary forms of participatory theatre. The IPTA success led Barucha to affirm that 'the naïveté of political theatre is not a limitation but a strength' (*Ibid.* *cf.* Chapter two and three; Mottin 2010). IPTA also started the tradition of travelling theatre festivals as a form of political activism which would be later taken up by other street theatre troupes.

Janam (meaning 'Birth' in Sanskrit, also the acronym of Jan Natya Manch, 'People's Theatre Front') was established in 1973. Their strength derived from a close link between audience and actors, a powerful acting style and Safdar's charisma (Epskamp 1989; van Erven 1992). Safdar Hashmi, a theatre activist and Janam's director, heralded street theatre as a popular art form. Much

like Ashoka in Pakistan and Aarohan in Nepal, Hashmi sought a performative alternative to 'the mediocrity' of the films that dominated Indian culture' (Ibid.) and attempted to develop street theatre into a full-fledged art form. As mainstream theatre was perceived as being out of touch with the majority of the people, Hashmi felt the need for a people's theatre which was available to the masses, but moved beyond the limitations of poster plays. From an aesthetic point of view, artists developed new skills fitting to the open acting area, new acting styles, writing skills, training, and new uses of music, verse, and theatre management. Janam's committed and militant theatrical form is characterised by the presence of the Chorus, frequent repetitions, the use of symbolic props (such as ropes and bloodstained shirts), objective correlatives of feelings, evocative song lyrics, a strong pace, slogans, and the employment of eye contact and direct address to the audience (Ibid.). Aesthetically, Janam's political plays present many common traits with Nepali political street performances.

Jana Sanskriti ('People's Culture') is a cultural organization founded in 1985 by Shujoy Bannerji in West Bengal (Mohan 2004a; 2004b). They employ a form of theatre that joins an adaptation of Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' with Indian folk forms like *Gaajan*, *Jatra*, etc. What is distinctive is the group's organizational structure and particularly their combining theatrical activities onstage with activism offstage, for example lobbying the *panchayat* for the right to cultural spaces, fighting dowry, domestic violence, and mobilizing people. It is an example of political activism outside party politics (Mohan Ibid.). A central theatre and activism team travels and involves the audience in forming new teams that will take care of both the performance and fieldwork aspects. Mohan (2004a; 2004b) reports that at the time of her fieldwork, 35 theatre teams were involved in Jana Sanskriti. Through theatre and activism Jana Sanskriti sees 'dance, theatre and music as political action when the means of representation are redistributed' (Ibid.). Jana Sanskriti's work is based on two equally important practices: performances (rehearsals, theatre workshop, enactment of plays, etc) and fieldwork (calling meetings, organising debate groups, maintaining cohesion across groups). As we will see later on, while doing the same kind of Forum Theatre, the organization and practices of Jan Sanskriti differ considerably from Aarohan Theatre Group.

Subtle threads link Nepali theatre to Indian theatre. Maoist cultural performances derive from customary Marxist stress on cultural work, of which IPTA is a popular instance. Nepali Maoist artists looked to Indian Naxalite examples when learning to write revolutionary songs and plays.¹⁶ India is a reference point for Nepali proscenium and street theatre artists as well. For example, a close bond has been established with the National School of Drama (NSD) in New Delhi (Chapter five). Moreover,

¹⁶ One artist shared that he had gone to India to learn composing songs from Gaddar, a popular artist associated to the Naxalite groups. In turn, he later went to Bhutan to teach the same to the local Maoists.

exchanges between Indian and Nepali artists are frequent especially through theatre festivals. But let us now move into the specificity, the *maulikta* (originality) of Nepali theatre.

2.3. Theatre in Nepal

'What are you doing in Nepal?' a person once asked me. 'I'm studying Nepali *natak* (theatre)' I answered. 'Ehhh', the person remarked with a smile, 'so you like Nepali dances!' 'Yes, very much' I replied slightly puzzled. 'Can you dance Nepali dances?' he continued. The connection between theatre, songs and dance came across at various times during my fieldwork. I very soon realized that there was a basic question I needed to ask: what does the word '*natak*' mean to Nepalis? What kind of images and memories does it suggest? For some reasons, it always triggered a smile and a sparkle in their eyes.

The words *natak* and *natya*, 'drama/theatre' in Nepali, have the same root as *nach* (informal) and *nrtya* (formal). They both mean 'dance' and immediately suggest that the two genres are connected. Often *nach* indicates a performance that includes songs, dances and dialogues. Unlike classical Western theatre, which is largely word-based, Nepali theatre, like Asian theatre in general, is rooted in actions and movements (Brandon and Banham 1997). Thus theatre becomes a privileged locus to study cultural practices. For anthropology, culture is not only inscribed and absorbed in the bodies of the actor, or dancer, and of the spectator (Pavis 2004:293), but it is also contested and created through these bodies becoming 'incorporated knowledge' (Hastrup 1994; Bourdieu 1996). Giving priority to a word-based kind of theatre would thus be limiting and would enact the imposition of a Western and ethnocentric perspective.

Nepali theatre(s) reflects the country's geographical, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and mingles Hindu and Buddhist religious-cultural traditions as well as Indic, indigenous and Western theatrical practices (Subedi 2001; 2006). Nepali theatre scholars usually distinguish three distinct theatrical streams (Subedi *ibid*). The first form is folk theatre which is diversified according to the different ethnic traditions existing in the country. Second, heritage performances blend rituals, festivals and dance-dramas, and are linked to folk and shamanic practices. Subedi emphasises that 'the traditional forms, the mask dances, ritual dramas, traditional dance dramas, tabloids representing vibrant cultural forms, short dance dramas are participated in and watched by a larger number of people than any modern plays' (2001:11). The third form is proscenium theatre that has been

influenced by Sanskrit and Western traditions. The history of modern proscenium theatre is relatively recent and is located mainly in Kathmandu (Ibid.).

In the sections that follow I will outline how the spheres of theatre, ritual and performance are intertwined so as to provide background for the performances analysed in subsequent chapters.

2.3.1. Divine actions in Nepali theatre

Performing on a stage is still respected as a religious act in ritual folk performances in Nepal. There is a temple, in Patan, dedicated to Nrityaswor or Nrityanath,¹⁷ the god of dance, music and drama. An image of the god appears on the *torana* of the temple, dancing with 16 hands. Inside the temple there are abstract representations of the god, stones and holes, as well as a *mada* on each side of the room containing the god. Everyday, devotees come to make *puja*, offering food and flowers. Satya Mohan Joshi, a former performer, is considered by actors an authority in the field. He says that central to the understanding of theatre in Nepal is the god of dance and the *dabu* or *dabali*, that is an open-air stage. The first corresponds with both Dionysus in the Greek mythology and Nataraj in the Indian pantheon. The open-air platform has hosted public performances since the 6th century CE.

As in the West, theatre is surrounded by sacredness (Abbing 2002). Many theatre actors transfer the 'sacredness' from the *dabu* to the modern stage. For example, the theatre hall is seen as a 'temple'. Gurukul has established a strict policy in this regard. Before the beginning of any show spectators are advised both by a speaker and through a written notice outside the entrance to switch off their mobile phones¹⁸ and restrain from eating or drinking. The atmosphere in Gurukul is very different from other halls such as the Nepal Academy where spectators talk aloud, move around, enter late or just come in and out of the hall at any time during the performance.¹⁹ In Gurukul, once the show has started the doors are closed. The audience is expected to remain in total silence for the whole duration of the performance. Such a strong exercise of authority over the audience in the name of theatre brings modern Nepali proscenium theatre closer both to the sacredness of traditional

¹⁷ The god is also called *Nateshwari/Natyashwari*, in Newari its name is *Nasadyah*. In the literature (Hoek, 1994), *Nasadyah* is indicated as god of dance and music, without mentioning drama.

¹⁸ This is a very unusual practice in Nepal where mobile phones normally ring in the most diverse situations, during meetings, during the shooting of films, during formal and informal conversations. Answering is usually not considered rude. Conversely, during rehearsals artists' mobiles rang all the time thus suggesting that real life was indeed part of the theatre.

¹⁹ Like in many cinema halls in the periphery.

performance and to the strict separation between artists and audience that characterizes mainstream Western theatre.

It is therefore worth focusing on the sacredness of ritual performance practice in order to understand how it is reasserted and reinforced in Gurukul. Before entering any kind of stage, be it a platform in the street or a hall, starting a rehearsal, cleaning the stage or performing, actors habitually bend, touch the stage with their right hand and then bring their hand to the forehead and the chest as a sign of respect and worship. The platform,²⁰ in fact, represents the god. Satya Mohan Joshi highlights that traditionally the first performance, dance or drama, must be 'sung' in the name of Nrityaswor. Only then can any programme start (Interview, October 2006). The following is the prologue of the song to the god of dance:

I am just coming for refuge,

Protect me and give me the nine sentiments²¹

Allow me to treat these things so that [I will be] a good actor/performer (Ibid.)²²

Satya Mohan Joshi also remarks on the importance of some of the 'rules and regulations' transmitted from *guru* to student. Bowing to the *guru*, bowing to the platform/stage, bowing to Nrityaswor, imploring 'I am just at your feet, protect me, teach me, whatever I may learn to be a good artist', and the observation of *puja* at the openings are all important rituals. According to Satya Mohan the link between the artist and the divinity is strong. The artist must respect these previously mentioned 'ethical rules' which are 'important for the morality' of the actors in order to achieve a connection with the divine. The rules apply only during the performance. Should the artist 'misbehave or not conduct [himself] well, we say the man will turn into a madman' comments Satya Mohan. Satya Mohan explains that rules such as bowing to the *guru*, to the platform and performing *puja* are still followed by the artists of the Nepal Academy (Interview, October 2006).²³ An image of Nrityaswor has been established in a corner of the basement of the Academy where the artists practice.

Theatre groups usually apply these rules in different ways. In Gurukul for example, Sunil Pokharel, the group director, does not want his artists to bow down to him or touch his feet as some

²⁰ In south India the platform – *mandai* – in the centre of the village is the site of the village goddess (*mandaiamma*); the etymology of the term for headman – *ampalar* – also come from the platform/stage (David Mosse, personal communication). In Nepali there seem to be no word related to authority linked with *dabu*.

²¹ He indicates 'humour, pathetic, marvellous, and the movements' (Ibid.)

²² Satya Mohan Joshi sang in Newari language and then translated himself into English.

²³ Similar rituals are performed also in the world of cinema: *puja* is carried out before shooting films, and whenever an actor enters the set for the first time he/she bows to the camera which is considered as a god, touching it with the forehead and then bowing again while rising up. It is also necessary to bow in such a ceremonial way to the director and the cameramen, waiting for their blessing. Some actors bow to the director at every meeting, until the director touches their heads, although many directors are less formal and do not require this practice.

senior artists and directors still welcome (cf. Chapter five). However, *puja* is carried out at the opening of any performance and actors take *prasad*. It is common practice before any show to light incense sticks and take them backstage and onto the stage itself to worship the gods and pray for a good performance. Actors sometimes place their hands over the holy smoke coming from the incense and bring them to their eyes. Part of the pre-performance ritual also involves shaking each other's hands and wishing 'best of luck', in a more secular way.²⁴ *Saraswati Puja* and *Guru Tika* on the last day of Dashain, are two recently established occasions that are used to renovate the link between theatre artists and the gods, and to strengthen the theatrical community through conventional practices. The second, in particular, started in 2005 and has since become a central event in the artistic community. Senior artists are honoured and the younger blessed by receiving *tika* from them.

Theatre is governed by such conventions applied to actors, hierarchies and rituals that reveal its sacredness. The *dabu* was a performance platform but also the place where kings acted and coronations took place. Until the end of the Rana rule, guards protected the *dabu* and only kings or artists could step on it. Theatre's link to power emerges. But theatre is an 'out-of-the-ordinary' world, governed by exceptional rules in Nepal as it is in the West (Abbing 2002).

2.3.2. When the actor BECOMES god

The relations between theatre, dance and religion are particularly evident in folk performances, *lok natak* or *lok nrtya*. Nepal is very rich in folk dances belonging to different ethnic communities, for example, *Baalun Nach* and *Krishnalila* from the Hindu culture is popular among Brahmin and Chettri groups, whilst *Gathu* and *Sorati* is preferred by the Gurung of West Nepal. Although these performances have been almost totally abandoned in urban areas they are still performed in the country. Some studies are available on Newari ritual dance/dramas performed in the Kathmandu Valley (Van den Hoek 1994; Korvald 1994; Lidke 2006; Levy 1990). In this section I will delve into the sacredness of the art and explain how actors become gods during many folk performances. Two dances/dramas, *Kartik Nach* (Patan) and *Bara Bhairav Nach* (Pokhara), are taken as examples. These highlight the transformative, sacred and almost magical qualities attributed to actors. I will later explore their actors as carriers of social transformation and change (see Chapter two).

²⁴ Similar informal rituals characterise also Western theatre.

Kartik Nach (see fig. 3) is performed in Patan Square (Patan), in front of the Krishna Temple. It runs for eight nights, during the month of *Kartik* (October-November). It is considered to be the oldest performance in Nepal. According to Satya Mohan Joshi, it has been performed continuously for 350 years (Interview, October 2006). The performance is composed of dramatic sections alternating with classical dances. In the past, it ran for the whole month of *Kartik*. Financial shortages led to the abridgement of the performance. It was first reduced to three days, and then was allotted a week. The organizers have recently set up a committee, which receives funding from both government and private organizations to cover the costs. Satya Mohan Joshi calls it 'a living tradition', offering the audience 'the true history of the development of drama in our country'.

In folk dramas the key roles, or 'hard roles'²⁵ are fixed and must be performed by members of specific families. The lion god Narsingha is the main character. No matter how good a performer, the actor playing Narsingha must belong to the family of the worshippers of Krishna Temple in Patan. In fact, only a Newar Brahmin is entitled to enter the innermost part of the temple. Even the co-star, Daitya, the devil that Narsingha kills during the performance, is a role prescribed for descendants of the Chitrakars, painters of ritual masks and holy images by caste occupation (Toffin 1999 [2008]: 240-263). Actors 'are not professional but still they are professional', Satya Mohan explains. He points out the amateur but technically skilled performance required of actors in annual ritual dramas. For the *Kartik Nach*, for example, actors practice for 7-10 days and are trained by traditional *gurus* (Satya Mohan Joshi, interview, *ibid.*). According to Satya Mohan Joshi, during the performance actors are considered to be the gods that they embody. For example, nobody can touch Narsingha during the whole dance, not even his fellow actors. His touch would cause their death. After the last dance, the actor playing Narsingha is brought back to his normal life through a long and detailed ritual of separation from the god. *Bahra Bhairav Nach* (Dance of the Twelve Bhairav) is performed in Pokhara by the Newar community. It celebrates the twelve forms of the god Bhairav, a fearsome manifestation of Shiva. Originally this musical drama took place every 12 years. Nowadays the organizers perform it every 5-6 years. Like Satya Mohan Joshi, Saru Bhakta is also keen on emphasizing that despite not being 'professionals' or earning money out of dancing, actors are very skilled and motivated. Their task is not only artistic but involves a religious commitment, 'they do it as their art and their responsibility' (*Ibid.*). Even in this dance the role takes over the actor and the audience sees and worships actors as gods. Such an ambivalent status is fully expressed during the performance of *Bahra Bhairav Nach*, as Saru Bhakta, actor and theatre director describes that the spectators do not

²⁵ According to Satya Mohan Joshi's definition.



Fig. 1. The *torana* of the temple dedicated to Natyashwari in Patan. It represents the dancing god.



Fig. 2. Senior artists are venerated in Gurukul during Guru Tika day.



Fig. 3. Artists impersonating the gods dance during Kartik Nach.

even touch the performers because after wearing the mask they become gods and are feared and worshipped as such. Saru Bhakta continues:

He [the actor]'s not in his conscious mind. He is unconscious. He trembles from feet to the head, in a musical way. He shakes his body, hands, legs. We call it also '*jangne*', '*deuta jangyo*'.²⁶ If the musicians don't play well, they don't keep the rhythm, if they miss the rhythm, the god gets angry and beats the musicians. Volunteers bring incense to relieve him and made him quiet. He cannot speak, the dancers don't speak (Interview, October 2006).²⁷

The link between theatre and religion is represented by Satya Mohan Joshi and Saru Bhakta as explicit. Theatre and dance are explained as having a divine connotation. A powerful transformation takes place through ritual actions and actors become gods for the time of the performance and are venerated as such (van den Hoek 1994). Even though there is not any straightforward link or exchange between traditional performance and theatre actors (see Chapter four), the religious halo surrounding theatrical activities is once again confirmed as strong and persisting.

2.3.3. A ritual topography

Ritual performances go beyond the religious sphere and powerfully enter the political. King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha is believed to have exploited the power of performance when he conquered the Nepal valley (Subedi 2006:14; van den Hoek 1990). The Newar were celebrating the Indra Jatra festival (see Toffin 1992). The Newar King Jayaprakash Malla fled the chariot which was supposed to carry him around the city. Prithvi Narayan himself took his place and was welcomed by the citizens with flowers (Ibid.). Prithvi Narayan then submitted himself to the Kumari, the virgin incarnation of the Goddess of the Malla Taleju from the very beginning (van den Hoek 1990:149). Political occupation was achieved through the appropriation of ritual practices. Bert van den Hoek (1993) portrayed Kathmandu as a ritualized battlefield, as well as a 'sacrificial arena'. The sacred and ordered space of the city is described as demarcated in two complementary ways: by fixed places, such as the *pitha* - seats of power belonging to the *matrikas*, mother goddesses - and by the moving *jatras*. They are emphasized during festivals.

The image of the city as a sacrificial arena is explained to be expressed most fully during Indra Jatra, dedicated to the king of the gods Indra and to the king of Nepal. Through the festival the

²⁶ Although Saru Bhakta never mentioned spirit possession while talking about actors becoming gods, the similarity of experience is significant. For literature on spirit possession in Nepal see Maskarinec (1995).

²⁷ All interviews included in the thesis were carried out in Nepali language and translated by myself unless stated.

king is empowered by the *sakti* of the city (van den Hoek 1993: 371). Indra Jatra is defined as a multi-faceted festival (van den Hoek 1990). Indra is mythically associated with fertility and prosperity (Ibid.). Yet, the main aim of the rite is to consolidate, renew and preserve the king's power (Ibid.). It is mostly performed publicly in the streets and in symbolically key places of the capital. I will provide details in this section as I aim to highlight the symbolic, performative and political strength of this public ritual.²⁸ Indra festival lasts for eight days between the months of *Bhadra* (August-September) and *Ashwin* (September-October). The month of *Bhadra* is symbolically a month of contestation and licence in the Kathmandu Valley (Toffin 1992). Demons threaten the universe and dance in the streets (*lakkhe pyakha*); improvised comic sketches (*khyalah*) involve lampooning politicians and religious personalities (Ibid.). The same takes place during Gai Jatra.²⁹ Indra Jatra closes the period, restoring the king's order over disruptive forces.³⁰

Theatricality helps conveying the sacredness of the ritual pertaining to the highest levels of power. Theatre is thus entrenched in the sacred, as the previous subsections suggest. Political power, the king's power in this case, was reinforced symbolically and publicly through popular participation in the streets. In chapter three I will provide contemporary instances of the royal power's manipulation of symbols and public ceremonies during the Emergency 2005 and describe how theatrical street demonstrations worked to delegitimize it.

2.3.4. Theatre and the Royal Palace

In Nepal, as in India, theatre was often a kingly matter. In classical India, during *indradhavaja*, a royal ritual similar to Indra Jatra in Nepal, kings appeared on the stage, and theatrical performances complemented ritual practices (Toffin 1992:80). Even now, during the Indra festival, pantomimes illustrating the ten incarnations of Vishnu are staged in front of the former royal palace in Hanuman Dhoka (Ibid.). Popular plays are usually staged in both villages and towns of the valley (Ibid.). Nepali theatre is strongly connected to political power, and the Royal Palace in particular. This sub-section

²⁸ For details on the ritual practices, social significance and historical development see Toffin 1992, van den Hoek 1990.

²⁹ Gai Jatra Festival has also powerful theatrical qualities. Gai Jatra is a festival celebrated in the Nepali month of Bhadra (August-September) to worship Yamraj, the god of death. During the day people paint their faces and social and political satirical sketches can be seen along the streets. Even during Panchyat days when press and expression freedoms were restricted, the comedians used this occasion to criticize and mock political leaders through stage shows and cartoons were also published in the newspapers and magazines. Stages shows are also popular and run at the Nepal Academy and the City Hall. I preferred to focus on Indra Jatra rather than Gai Jatra because it helps explaining the theatricality of the royal power described in the chapter three.

³⁰ The king's power is ritually celebrated also during the festival of Dasai, see Krauskopff and Lecomte-Tilouine 1996.

aims to provide basic information about the development of modern Nepali theatre to prepare the ground for the next chapters.³¹

Nepali theatre is thought to have begun during the Lichhavi period (3rd-4th century CE) though little remains of that kind of theatre except for statues and inscriptions (Subedi 2006). Art and architecture flourished thanks to the country's position along the commercial route linking India to China (Ibid.). According to historians, *manasgriha* and *kailashkuta bhawan* functioned both as assembly and as theatre halls (Pokhrel in Lamsal, Ibid.).

The Malla period (1200-1768) is considered to be the 'golden age' of drama (Subedi 2006). Theatre and arts in general prospered. The kings performed as actors on the *dabali* along with theatre artists. They wrote dramas and patronized performances (Ibid.). During the 17th and 18th centuries kings, courtiers and common people watched plays performed on the *dabali* ³²situated in the middle of the *tole* (locality), near the palace and the temple. The kings often watched the performances from the window of their houses while the audience sat on their mats around the platform (Ibid.). Dramas were performed for festivals, religious celebrations, pilgrimages, and for royal ceremonies such as weddings, births, and coronations. Maithili drama greatly influenced the Medieval Mallas (Slusser 1982).

The 'unification' of Nepal achieved by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769 brought about deep socio-economic, political, cultural and linguistic changes. Historians highlight how there was no significant theatrical development during Prithvi's reign. The Shah kings (1769-1846) participated in rituals and festivals but did not patronize theatre *per se* (Subedi 2006: 15).

The Rana (1846-1950) brought about a great change in theatrical practices. They created theatre groups and established exclusive theatre houses inside the courts where family members, officials and servants could attend, sitting according to their rank (Malla 1980). These performances were influenced by the theatrical practices of the royal courts of India as well as by Western and Parsi performances (Ibid.). Parsi theatre, so-called because run by and bankrolled by Parsis in nineteenth-century India, became popular the first decades of the 20th century (Subedi 2006; Malla, *ibid.*) Although confined to the courts, because Ranas were not interested in creating a theatrical public, Parsi theatre influenced dramatic productions even outside the court and the capital in towns like Pokhara, Dharan, Dhankuta and Palpa (Subedi 2006:77). Artists outside the court tried to approach the quality of Parsi dramas, making use of magnificent scenic curtains, melodrama, mixing Urdu and Hindi in songs and dialogues, but their lack of resources and skills made such experiments short-lived (Ibid.).

³¹ For thorough accounts see Malla 1980, Subedi 2006.

³² A platform for performance said to have originate in the Licchavi period (Malla1990:11)

At the turn of the 20th century, exchanges between India and Nepal were common. Dumber Shumsher Rana (grandfather of Balkrishna Sama) was sent to Calcutta in 1893 to get training in dramaturgy while Manik Man Tuladhar was the first non-Rana to be trained in India in 1900 (Subedi, *ibid.* 80). However, during the Rana period, except for Sama's plays, dramas were usually not written in Nepali. They were translated from Sanskrit and Hindi, but Nepali was mixed with Urdu and Hindi (Malla 1980).

The Rana rulers took girls, aged 13-14, from villages and brought them to their palaces. In every palace there were 50 to 60 girls who were taught dance, drama, singing and music by Indian trainers. The palace paid for their living. They resided in separate palaces and also received a salary. Inside the palace women were basically responsible for all kinds of art and entertainment activities forbidden to men (Prachanda Malla, interview, November 2006). Prachanda Malla explains that in many palaces, trainers turned a women's voice into a man's voice with lots and lots of practice. Others retained their everyday female voice but in performance they could project their voice as male. Beyond the palaces there was no such environment; there were no stages or facilities and women were not allowed to perform. There were also no training facilities. The reversal is interesting. If within the palaces women played men's roles, outside, in festivals like Gai Jatra or Indra Jatra, men performed female roles.

Plays performed in the streets on the *dabali* during the same period were much simpler, without curtains and props. *Jyapunach*, the farmer's dance, was performed for eight days during Gai Jatra or Indra Jatra, provided the actors received permission from the Rana. Bekha Narayan Maharjan (1926-2006) and his group were among the most prominent performers (Subedi 2006:102). The audience would sit on straw mats around the *dabali* while street vendors sold peanuts and food. Actors were very popular at the time and some, such as Ratnadas, were considered as superstars. Master Ratnadas was a singer and an actor, like Hari Prasad Rimal and Bekha Narayan Maharjan. Having a good voice, in fact, was an essential quality of an actor. Hari Prasad Rimal brought important changes to the very artificial and stylized acting style of Parsi artists, as well shifting the 'Samian style of epical and sublime acting' (*Ibid.* 99) towards a more natural form.

Balakrishna Sama (1907-1981), the most prominent Nepali dramatist, was responsible for bringing drama out of the Rana palaces and for using theatre to rebel against the Rana autocratic domination. Balkrishna Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana (his real name) was born in 1907. His family background allowed him to receive the best education available in the country. However, he could not bear the inequalities he saw among the ruling class and after experiencing great mental strain he even changed his name in order not to be associated with his family anymore (*Ibid.*). Sama, which means 'equal', is said to have introduced 'real human characters' onto the stage, moving away from

previous productions characterized by historical, traditional and mythological topics (Ibid.). He also shifted proscenium theatre out of the palaces and was a strong supporter of the use of Nepali language in theatre and education (Onta in Subedi 2006:120). The first Nepali play written and directed by Sama was presented in Kathmandu in 1937. It was *Mukunda Indira*. He was considered as the "Shakespeare" of Nepal. Prachanda Malla, one of Sama's students and actors, remembers his master's theatrical revolution:

Balkrishna Sama involved students of Darbar High School to stage this play. Women were not allowed to play, that's why men had to play female roles. He also changed the costumes, because initially, when they did plays in the palaces, costumes were made from very expensive clothes with real diamonds and pearls in it. But he used normal clothes that normal people wear. He did the play in pure and clear Nepali language. He didn't use painted screens but a black screen. Prime Minister Juddhasamsher saw the play and was very happy with it and he gave Balkrishna Sama a very good post in the army and also land. The play was staged many times in the Singha Durbar, Town Hall, now Bishal Bazar. There were many shows of that play and it was on ticket (Interview, November 2006).

On the other hand, Keshar Man Tuladhar³³ considered Sama's plays rather bland and made only of poetry: 'there would be no music, no dance, no singing. There was only dialogue. But in our shows there was everything – music, dance and songs' (Subedi 2006:83).

With the restoration of the Shah dynasty in 1951, the theatrical art was strengthened. King Mahendra himself is frequently represented as a great lover of art. He was well aware of the celebrative power of art. He sponsored the construction of the Royal Nepal Academy and many theatre halls in the capital. He also requested artists to write plays in his honour. It is interesting to remark here, anticipating later arguments, how the royal family started the practice of 'obliging' school children publicly to parade and engage in cultural activities to be performed on special occasions, such as the birthday of the king or of other members of the royal family. Children who refused were punished. School parades were staged extensively. While cultural and traditional street performances continued, the 1970s were characterized by popular well-made sentimental and often nationalistic plays (Rijal in Subedi 2006:142) as well as *gitinatak*, musical plays, mirroring Hindi film stories and style. In the 1980s, a theatre of humour and political satire hitting the corrupt practices of ministers, politicians and bureaucrats increased in popularity (Ibid.). Street theatre and poetry festivals, including ethnic and language festivals, expressed resistance to the Panchayat rule in a permitted way (see p. 70 onwards). In fact, the early 1980s also marked the beginning of a new kind of street theatre in Nepal that I will describe in Chapter two.

³³ A Parsi theatre artist.

From this short history, two points are worth remarking for our purpose. First, with the end of the Malla period, royal and popular audiences were separated. Theatre entered the palaces and popular performances developed outside. However, some artists had access to and performed in both spaces. Second, Aarohan Theatre dedicated its two halls to Balkrishna Sama and Gopal Prasad Rimal (Subedi 2006; Hutt 1991). Through these two very different artists, arose two important revolutions: the first artist popularised theatre and carried out important stylistic changes. The second artist powerfully introduced social themes. From the 1980s, modern Nepali theatre continued to grow in opposition to the Royal Palace (see Chapters two and three).

2.3.5. Aarohan Theatre Group and the growth of the art in Nepal

What follows is a brief historical background to the establishment of Aarohan Theatre Group, the theatre group where I conducted most of my fieldwork. It aims to show how the group grew through trying to reverse the dominant negative view of theatre as a low form of popular art, and how the group developed around the leading figure of its director, Sunil Pokharel.³⁴ Both these aspects will shed light on the group's growth as an organization that I will describe in Chapter five.

Aarohan Theatre Group was established in 1982 under the direction of Sunil Pokharel. The founding members of the group were Badri Adhikari, Sunil Pokharel, Chandramala Sharma, Suryamala Sharma, Pradeep Shrestha, Samanta Kansakar, Nisha Sharma and Basanta Bhatta. Other artists joined the group in later stages making a total of 16 artists. The group soon defined itself in opposition to mainstream popular entertainment. A leaflet from the late 1990s stresses that the main objective of Aarohan was to perform 'meaningful plays in Nepalese Theatre', an objective the group shared with other groups active in the 1980s like Janam in India (Hashmi 1989) or Ashok in Pakistan (Afzal-Khan 1997; 2005). Explaining the ideals that moved them to found a theatre group, Sunil Pokharel (Interview, November 2004) noted that they were young, dissatisfied with Bollywood movies which were very popular in Nepal, and that they wanted to change the world. These words sum up the 'double soul' of the group, committed to artistic proscenium theatre on the one hand, and to political and social street theatre on the other.

Aarohan staged many foreign plays in Nepal for the first time, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus* in 1985. The reviewer of *The Rising Nepal* (August 5th) praised the choice of staging the classics as 'a

³⁴ Many groups in Nepal and abroad developed around their directors.

matter of great cultural value'. Then in 1989-90 Aarohan organized what is described as a groundbreaking event in Kathmandu. *Aarohan Shanibar* (Aarohan Saturday) was a programme running throughout the year that scheduled a new play every month, by Nepali and world playwrights alternately. Each drama was performed for four Saturdays in a row, at 3 p.m., for a membership-based audience at the French Cultural Centre. In 1989 the membership fee was NRs. 200 a year (programme flyer). Around 400 members joined the programme (Sunil Pokharel, personal communication). The group performed works by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertold Brecht, Mohan Rakesh, Alexander Vampolov, Junji Kinoshita, as well as by Nepali playwrights such as Govinda Bahadur Malla 'Gothale', Balkrishna Sama. Performing diversified works seems to have been a heartfelt concern for Aarohan's artists, the result of the need to define their identity. Documents of the time suggest that the plays targeted a specific audience. The flyer advertising a re-presentation of the format of Aarohan Shanibar in December 2000- February 2001, reminds the readers that the 1989-1990 event 'was active to attract the intelligentsia of Nepal'. This sequel was also framed as a response to the previous audience request: 'Ten years elapsed...a decade, and we entered into a new millennium. The selected audience of Aarohan Shanibar in 1990... i.e. philosophers, professors, lawyers, journalists ...are again asking Aarohan Shanibar to illustrate its identity'. The flyer ends by remembering once more the historical link with the 1989-90 edition: 'The Aarohan Shanibar a decade ago was wished by intellectuals working in different positions. The same is undoubtedly prevalent even today. So, we feel all of you with us'.

Even an information sheet produced by the French Cultural Centre for the 1989 edition highlights the targeting of a restricted audience, emphasizing that 'those plays will be classical texts intended for a learned audience'. The same document reports that the first play was performed in front of the 'Honourable Minister for Education, the Vice-Chancellor of Tribhuvan University and many journalists', somehow hinting at a search for a formal and official recognition of the cultural activities organized by the group. The long production was a catalyst for motivating artists and art lovers in the capital. Throughout the whole year, a poem, a picture and a painting were also displayed, alongside the performance of each play. Commenting upon the project 15 years later, Sunil Pokharel says that the programme financially failed because many spectators did not pay the membership fee and the actors had to volunteer. It nonetheless created a wave of interest for the theatre. The audience participated, asking questions after the plays and helping with the organization, for example sponsoring brochures or tea. The network of connections created at the time is still in existence and includes present-day politicians and journalists (ibid). As described in chapter three, the 1990s were a critical time for Nepali theatre. Aarohan staged some proscenium plays, such as *Dr. Knox*, *Jat*

Sodhnu Jogiko, and *Oedipus*, but they ran only for a few days at a time, following a practice at the time that was determined by the high rents of the theatre halls and uncertain audience participation.

From the very beginning, Aarohan's identity was associated with artistic, serious, and 'meaningful' theatre work for the capital's intellectuals; therefore, having a positive response from the public was important for self-sustainability. In fact, in Nepali society of the late 1980s, artists strategically used what was considered as 'respectable', 'written' Nepali and foreign dramas, to legitimize not only their productions but also their art itself. Distancing themselves from popular street and traditional performances, they attempted to give dignity and recognition to their work. Although Aarohan performed street theatre both during political demonstrations and for development projects, the label of an 'intellectual and élite group' followed them, as I was occasionally told by some of my informants. During my fieldwork, artists outside the group criticised Aarohan for staging too many foreign plays. Sunil Pokharel explains that there were several reasons behind their choice. First, according to him, staging foreign plays was important to train actors by exposing them to different artistic styles and forms. Second, not many Nepali plays that are 'meaningful' to the audience are available. And then, by presenting foreign plays, actors aimed at giving 'respectability' to their job. Respectability is granted through the 'intellectuality' of the work, through the 'thoughts'. He explains:

When we started theatre wasn't a prestigious job. It was a third-rate thing in our families, because we came from middle-class families, Brahman's families. And theatre as a job was like what prostitutes do, or like that, uneducated people, under SLC [school leaving certificate] people, they do theatre. That was the basic idea. At least in my 25 years in theatre somehow I tried to prove that 'no, theatre is good work'. There are thoughts³⁵... That's why we did lots of foreign plays and [to] shock people actually. We did Camus and people [said] 'Camus? Wow!' (Interviewed in English, November 2006)

However, even nowadays, foreign plays are strategically used to assert the actors' value. For example, Krishna Shah Yatri, an actor and director of Jyoti Punja Theatre, compared his experience of staging plays for Dashain festival, 15-20 years ago, with what he had recently seen in his village. When he was young, groups of people in his community gathered to organize plays for Dashain festival. They joined spontaneously, and staged religious-cultural works. On the contrary, for Dashain 2006, the youth of his village staged Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The actors justified their choice saying 'if we do a foreign play, people will say this is good, people will say he's one who knows'. Krishna commented that in this way the 'typical culture and identity is lost'. Conversely, his observations recall the accusations raised against Aarohan's choices. There is a hierarchy of

³⁵ Sunil justifies his work through the same 'intellectual' categories that society used to question the value of theatre.

'knowledge' at stake. 'Knowledge' serves to achieve prestige and recognition. 'Foreign knowledge' pays higher than 'Nepali knowledge'. A more practical issue needs to be considered at this point though. Staging proscenium plays require funding which is provided neither by NGOs nor by international organizations. Even the British Council prefers to fund development projects rather than proscenium plays, according to some actors. It is often foreign embassies that sponsor the staging of theatrical pieces, providing they are written by playwrights from their country. Therefore, the relationship between Nepali theatre and 'foreignness' is controversial, not only a matter of theatrical identity but also of 'professional identity'. Nepali's relationship with 'foreign goods' in general is an intriguing co-existence between attraction and rejection (cf. Liechty 1997; Hachhethu 1990). In theatre, staging foreign plays can be simultaneously be a source of prestige but may also attract accusations of lacking 'Nepaliness'.

As anticipated, the second point I want to make in this section is about the leading actors' personal involvement with the group. The history of the group is closely related to the life trajectories of its director. From 1984 to 1987 Sunil Pokharel studied direction at the NSD (National School of Drama) in Delhi, India, but he returned to Nepal during vacations to stage theatrical productions. For many years the group gathered whenever it was necessary, to rehearse stage productions or dramas for development projects. At that time, most of the actors were making a living through other jobs. In fact, many of the founding members of Aarohan left theatre for income-generating work because the theatre did not provide a means of sustenance. In the 1980s and 1990s, only artists regularly employed at the government institutions, those engaged in television productions or in the upper echelons of the movie industry could live from their acting. When I started my fieldwork in 2004, the only founding members still actively involved in the group were Sunil Pokharel, Nisha Sharma Pokharel and Basanta Bhatta. They continued to carve time for Aarohan rehearsals, and took roles in films and tele-series when not doing theatre. While officially retaining their membership of the group, all other actors were really only present as sympathizers. Sunil, Nisha and Basanta supervised decision-making and group management. Sunil recalls that the group's 'office' was contained in his bag until the establishment of Gurukul (Informal conversation, December 2004). Sunil and Nisha's accounts reveal the great personal effort invested to give continuity to Aarohan. They took personal risks, which resulted in a profound sense of commitment.

For example, Basanta Bhatta juggled his job at the Home Ministry with his passion for acting for 20 years. His participation in theatrical productions was independent of his professional occupation and he relied on the permissions for leave. He recounts that he managed to rehearse because his bosses often allowed him time; they knew he was an artist, and because he was good at his office job they were generous and accommodating of his requests. Even when he was transferred

to the Indian border in Karkharbitta he managed to find time to go to Kathmandu for rehearsals. However, in the subsequent period, when he worked in the Sunauli border in 1994-95, he had to stop acting. His workload was heavy and thus received no leave. He therefore asked for an assignment in Kathmandu. At the time, Basanta was working in the immigration office at the Indian border, and his boss was happy with his work performance:

When I told him, 'Sir, I am an actor, if I go to the Western side I could not do theatre and my life is finished. So if you love me, please give me a place here [in Kathmandu]', so that I can do theatre on weekly holidays'... When I started here the boss said, 'he's a national actor, please give him facilities'. (Interviewed in English, October 2005)

It was only in 2004, that Basanta, in his 40's, was first employed full-time in theatre. To sum up, Aarohan Theatre Group had been active for more than two decades in the Nepali theatrical environment, but in a discontinuous way, like other theatre groups. The emotional, economic and temporal investment of the committed members created invincible bonds and the theatre group became the focal point of their lives. But it was only with the establishment of the Gurukul School of Theatre that it developed into a structured and stable organization representing, for the three leading actors, the possibility of fulfilling the dream of a lifetime.

Every voice has a place in this diverse country.

Theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it. (Augusto Boal)

We do not believe in one global village. Thousands of different villages create the world.

Change the world! It needs it. (Bertold Brecht)³⁶

In 2006, for a month, I rehearsed a play by Dabali Theatre Group. I experienced first-hand what I had often heard stories about: actors not turning up for rehearsals, or arriving 2-3 hours late, by which time those who had been punctual had finished or left; artists quitting a few days before the opening; dancers coming to only one in four rehearsals. At the beginning I was very committed and I dedicated the whole month to observing 'how a play was built'. But after weeks of disruption, even my enthusiasm was diminished. In the end, I also turned up only when I had time, and prioritised my other research work. There was desperation and anger. The director threatened to leave if actors did not behave more responsibly, and then skipped the following day's rehearsal, thus disappointing those actors who were trying to follow the 'agreements'. There were long discussions about the necessity of taking theatre more 'seriously'. An actor expressed his

³⁶ Slogans and citations from Aarohan Theatre Group's brochure.

frustration, saying 'This is why bikas [development] is not coming to Nepal! People don't take responsibilities'. At that time, we did not do even one full rehearsal before the opening. Because of the lack of a proper sound-check, many voices could hardly be heard. Maybe there is truth in the saying, then, that in Nepal, the opening is the grand rehearsal! (Excerpt from my fieldnotes)

Creating a formal school of theatre responded to the need for: improved artistic skills, ownership of the performance space and 'means of production', and the stable employment of full-time actors. These were the principal objectives underlining Sunil Pokharel's ideation of Gurukul, the first independent theatre school in Nepal, in 2002. Aiming at professionalizing theatre in Nepal, Gurukul maintained its foundational cultural and social focus, as defined in both its slogan - Theatre for Better Reasons - and in its three goals:

1. Bringing theatre to the Nepali people

Aarohan develops theatre as a local alternative to the globalized mass-media. We create stage performances, street theatre, training and workshops, festivals, as well as telefilms and documentaries. Our performance group has staged a wide variety [of] plays in Nepal and at international theatre festivals. We have adapted some of the great plays of the world to the Nepali stage, including works by Brecht, Sophocles, Junji Kinoshita, Albert Camus and Sartre. We also stage plays of Nepal's playwrights – Govinda Gothale, Bijaya Malla, Abhi Subedi and Ashesh Malla among others.

2. Exploring a Nepali Theatre Language

Aarohan struggles to preserve, develop, and reinterpret the diverse artistic traditions of the Nepali people. We have built upon the artistic traditions of our country through reinterpretations in stage dramas (such as the critically acclaimed *Agni ko Katha*). We also work to revitalize indigenous performance traditions where they exist. We pioneered this work with performances of *Dabali*, the traditional public theatre of Newar Kathmandu. Aarohan now is developing a resource centre and theatre school, with documentation and training facilities focusing especially on Nepali theatre traditions.

3. Promoting social justice, pluralism and democracy

Theatre is a weapon to improve life. Aarohan performs street theatre regularly on social issues. We also train and carry out workshops to help community groups use theatre in their own struggles. We have adopted the Brazilian Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to the context of our country. We teach the techniques and experiment with them ourselves to allow marginalized groups to 'rehearse for life' on stage. Our goal is to bring marginalized voices into the mainstream through theatre.

(From the brochure of Aarohan Theatre Group, 2005)

Initially, Gurukul was intended as an art centre. Its board members included artists from different fields including photography, painting, and cinema. It was intended that they live and work there as artists-in-residence. The first ten students, Sarita, Rajkumar, Aruna, Rajan, Suresh, Bhola, Saugat, Kamal, Yubaraj and Mani, helped with creating the centre but were not officially admitted as

board members.³⁷ Afterwards, however, the original idea was not implemented, and, at least for the time that I was there, the board did not meet. Sunil Pokharel became the centre's *de facto* director. Gurukul was refocused as a theatre school and other artistic activities were only hosted temporarily. This change of direction led to the existence of different, even contrasting, sets of organizational foundation stories (see Chapter five).

As the name itself suggests, Gurukul was conceived as a traditional school centred around a *guru*.

Before Nepal had western-style schools providing formal education, we had other centres of learning. One was the Gurukul, an ashram where a kul guru – a principal guru or sage – would teach in his own way. Classes did not take place in classrooms, nor did they take place through formal teaching. Students lived and worked at the ashram – cooking meals, serving the guru, and collecting alms. The learning went beyond the boundaries of subjects to educate the entire human beings. (Gurukul's brochure, 2005)

This is how the group itself defines the modern Nepali version of Gurukul in their brochure (2005)

The Aarohan Theatre Group has adapted the concept of Gurukul to modern times. We run a full-time two-year theatre course, with classes ranging from acting and world theatre to yoga and martial art. But we still hold on to the heart of the Gurukul concept. The students live at the school and manage the centre themselves, cleaning, supervising various departments, and participating in theatre productions. The school does not teach theatre skills alone. We also believe that theatre is still the strong means of promoting human values. Theatre should always remain close to the aspirations and experience of human life. A good theatre worker is a fundamentally good human being.

The group's vision is described as follows:

We seek a theatre that reflects the diverse society, history and cultural traditions of our country. We pursue theatre as politics, as a form of resistance to the passivity induced by globalized consumer-oriented mass-media. We want to create theatre activists – in our school and in communities throughout the country – who know their history and engage creatively and skilfully in the struggles of the people (Ibid.).

In chapter five, I will analyse the dominant narrative based on interviews with Aarohan actors, magazine and newspaper articles, and the group's publicity materials. I will also delve into the development of acting in theatre as a profession, the evolution of the theatre group into an organization, as well as how Forum Theatre developed in the Nepali context (Chapter four).

³⁷ In 2004 the second in-take of students started the courses. It included Pasupathi, Saraswati T. (quit in 2005), Saraswati C., Samuna (quit in 2005), Pramila, Om Prakash (quit in 2006), Ganeshyam (quit in 2005), Ram Hari, Prabin, Sita (quit in 2005).

3. Methodology

3.1. Multi-sites

Scholars of popular theatre employing ethnographic research methodologies have often undertaken a prolonged period of fieldwork focusing on a specific village, a 'bounded community', or (as in the present case) a theatre company. For instance, Karin Barber (2000) worked for several years with the Oyin Adéjòbí Theatre Company providing an extremely detailed analysis of the production and performance of popular Yoruba drama as well as vivid insights into the personalities of the principal actors. Similarly, Seizer (2005) studied the lives of popular Special Drama artists in Tamil Nadu. Although here there were no theatrical troupes, Seizer nonetheless travelled with the artists and followed both the performances and the context in which they were set; that is, the audience and their sponsors. In contrast, Laura Edmondson (2007) opted for a multi-sited methodology and worked with the three major companies of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. Drawing on Marcus (1998), Edmondson argues that the 'singular focus perpetuates outdated notions of culture as an isolated entity that the ethnographer must "penetrate" and understand; moreover, it tends to preclude awareness of the larger network of forces in which the site is enmeshed' (2007:10).

My fieldwork took place during several stays in Nepal: November 2004 - February 2006, July -December 2006 and July -September 2007, March-April 2008, October-December 2008. I have decided to confine the analysis in the present thesis to the first three periods. I returned to Nepal several times, first because of hindrances involved in the first fieldwork period, and second because of the new ethnographic possibilities offered by the dramatic events taking place in the country at the time. Later trips provided important insights on the first. My initial project was supposed to be 'multi-sited' (Marcus 1995). I intended to spend the first months in Kathmandu working with Aarohan Theatre Group and then move outside the capital for another two stretches of fieldwork with two of their local partner groups. The aim was to understand how drama-based techniques were adapted and used in different locations— at the centre and in the periphery. This plan had to be significantly changed once I was in Nepal, largely due to unexpected political turmoil and the difficulty of working outside Kathmandu. I therefore took a multi-positioned, rather than a multi-sited, stance. In fact, at first I mostly worked with a single theatre company, but then I needed to step outside this company in order to contextualise my experiences. I interviewed theatre practitioners from other theatre groups and observed their work, although in less depth. In particular, apart from Aarohan Theatre Group, with whom I lived for the first six months, I had prolonged contact only with a Maoist cultural group, the

Senchyang Sanskritik Parivar (see Mottin 2010). In March 2005 I also joined INSN (International Nepal Solidarity Group), an activist group aiming at supporting the democratic process in Nepal through a website and collective actions. This allowed me to connect with civil society groups, participate and have access to documents that turned out to be useful, especially when writing about protest in chapter three.

The methodology I used during the first part of my fieldwork consisted in participant observation: living with the actors, getting to know them, following their daily work, from physical training to performance creation and production. It involved watching dozens of *kachahari* performances, acting in some political street plays, and engaging in informal conversations about actors' lives and work. I first traced the historical development of the group's productions through newspaper articles and magazines available at Aarohan's archive. It was only after moving out from Gurukul that I started to interview the actors in a more formal way. I have made ample use of personal narratives in the form of informal conversations, semi-structured or video-recorded interviews. First, personal narratives are central in the meaning-making process. A character is revealed, constructed and transformed in every day conversations (Wortham 2001). As Gergen observes, 'narrative is not only a chief means by which the individual self is defined, but it also exerts a formative influence on our understanding of the world about us' (2001:vii). In fact, narrative is best understood in terms of a Bakhtinian dialogic because the utterances gain their significance in the relationship between the narrator and the audience (Ibid.). For this reason I will clarify my position in the next sections.

I plunged into participant observation immediately. Soon after arriving in Kathmandu, at the end of November 2004, Sunil Pokharel, the Aarohan Theatre director, invited me to move inside the Gurukul hostel, an 'ideal' field situation. It was supposed to be a temporary arrangement but since we could not find any suitable room nearby, I was allowed to stay for as long as I wanted, paying a small fee. I shared a room with three actresses belonging to the second intake of students that had started the theatre course in the summer of 2004. Both the first and second intake of students lived in Gurukul hostel. Sunil Pokharel and his wife Nisha lived in a private flat 20 minutes away from the school. So did Basanta, an actor and group manager, and his family. Anil Pokharel, a senior artist from Aarohan also lived outside Gurukul even though he was not married. Anoj, who volunteered in the administration, lived in the hostel as well.

The state of Emergency declared by the king on 1st February 2005 ended my research as it had been conceived, and opened up totally new scenarios. Because of the curtailing of civil liberties (see Chapter two), Aarohan could not perform *kachahari natak* any more. Their partner groups outside Kathmandu were also prevented from working. I decided to remain in Nepal and follow the development of the situation, turning my attention to the 'impossibility of doing street theatre' rather

than to the performances themselves. My plan had to be reshaped as I had to remain in Kathmandu and so I restricted the focus of my work.

For the three months of the Emergency, Aarohan theatre performed only proscenium plays. In the meantime, after spending more than five months almost exclusively inside the Gurukul compound, as actors normally did, I felt the need to understand both the wider theatrical and political context. I got involved in the INSN (International Nepal Solidarity Network) activist group and was thus able to gain first hand experience of the hardship faced by Nepali activists during the king's rule, and to get in contact with civil society members who would later start the Citizen's Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP). In June 2005, for different reasons, I decided to move out of Gurukul. During the first two months Gurukul seemed an idyllic place. It was a peaceful and protected sanctuary in the middle of Kathmandu, far from the crowd, dust and mess of the city. Nonetheless, I slowly started to hear counter-narratives, but from inside I could not grasp the context in which the theatre group was working so as to situate them.

As highlighted by Edmondson (2007:10), a single focus can preclude the anthropologist from 'locating' the community/theatre group within other communities of interest and instead reify local narratives, I realized that during the first months I had become 'closely associated' with the group, spending all my time in the compound and occasionally performing. This 'precluded' other associations. The grand narrative that circulated inside Gurukul described Aarohan as the only active theatre group in the city. In reality, other groups were working, although not with the continuity and the organization that Aarohan had. I needed to gain perspective by understanding the work of these other theatre groups. Moreover, I needed to have more independence in moving around the city without having to inform the actors about where I was going every time I left the compound. I also needed some privacy. Living in a commune system had been exciting and allowed for the creation of friendly relationships with the artists. However, Gurukul was also a 'hyper' public space. From February 2005 performances ran daily and therefore it was visited by hundreds of people. I often had to sit in cafés outside the compound to find a calm place to write my field notes. So in July 2005, I moved into an independent flat. I continued to follow *kachahari* performances and visit Gurukul on a daily basis.

The pattern of the *kachahari* performances that resumed in June 2005 was different from that before the Emergency. Up until January, workshop-based performances were staged together with issue-based plays. From June 2005, the second modality became almost exclusive, which meant that the same play was repeated in different schools or streets (Chapter five). A significant change in theatre practice was taking place and I felt the performances were being standardized. For this

reason, I reviewed my initial plan of not doing audience research and instead carried out a survey among 9 schools, involving about 800 students/audience members. However, the objective was not to check if the performance had changed attitudes or behaviours, as such a question may require a project in itself, long-time observation and would be fraught with difficulties (cf. Kershaw 1992). I did not want to take a behaviouristic approach and consider successful the performances that brought about immediate behaviour changes. In fact, some performances may produce immediate effects (i.e. political theatre can stir up the audience and for this reason it is considered as dangerous by the establishment). Other performances may just provide hints that can lead to change on the long run. Moreover, as artists point out (see Chapter four section three) what distinguishes Forum Theatre from other forms of street theatre techniques is that artists do not start a performance with a preconceived solution to a problem. It is the audience member, once stepped onstage as spect-actor, that engages in enacting solutions and has to persuade the remaining audience that such solution is a possible and plausible alternative. The audience in fact can even reject what suggested by the spect-actor as fanciful and not applicable to a real life problem. In Chapter four I will detail how the practice of *kachahari natak* changed from standard Forum Theatre performance. With the survey I aimed to understand the relevance of the performance topic to the audience real life experience (Chapter four). In fact, what distinguishes Forum Theatre from other street theatre techniques is its potential for questioning embodied patterns of experience through entering the performance space. However, this process may take place if the topic enacted is perceived as a personal issue by the audience.

Then, in September 2005, my research was reinvested with energy and urgency as a result of the political theatre which came to the fore in conjunction with the mass meetings organised by civil society (see Chapter three). I had to choose between focusing exclusively on development theatre, which was taking a lower profile at that moment, and documenting also political theatre or *loktantrik natak* (theatre for democracy). Paradoxically, the political situation had obliged artists to adopt strategies similar to those that I had heard about in interviews on the political theatre of the 1980s. I therefore decided to follow the topicality of the political plays. All in all, collecting 'variations' of the same *kachahari* play was not meaningful to my research methodology which focused on the generative aspects of the performances. Historically speaking, *kachahari* represents the 'ordinary' side of theatre work and thus could always be revisited and analysed in more depth. Political theatre, instead, represents the 'special', the contingent, and is much more difficult to 're-construct' at a later stage. I opted for the second.

By focusing on the different performances for social change that characterised the period between 2005-2007, rather than on a detailed analysis of the way in which the same *kachahari* was

interpreted in varying locations, my research - although Kathmandu-centric - became geographically, theoretically and performatively 'multi-sited'.

Between September 2005 and January 2006, I also visited two Aarohan partner groups, the Kamlari Natak Samuha in Lamahi (Deukuri Valley) and Kalika Natak Samuha in Taulihawa (Kapilvastu). My time with these groups was limited in comparison to Aarohan. I have not included them as case-studies because of the word limit in the thesis; but they provided remarkable comparative insights for understanding the activities of Kathmandu-based groups (see Chapter six). During the second period of my fieldwork, in July 2006, I got in contact with Maoist cultural groups and followed their performances during the party's politico-cultural programmes (see Mottin 2010). Documenting Maoist cultural programmes was important in order to have a more complete picture of the cultural performances for social change available to Kathmandu audiences between 2005-06. Working with Maoist artists was like carrying out a fieldwork within the fieldwork (Ibid.). Moreover, in many ways their objectives and modalities overlapped with those of development plays for community mobilization, as I will detail in Chapter six.

3.2. Multi-dramatis persona

There is an inherent tension in doing participant observation embedded in the technique itself and which has been highlighted by many anthropologists. It is the necessity of being both a participant and an observer; of being both simultaneously. The degrees of participation and of observation change throughout different stages of the fieldwork. The researcher's initial ignorance entails a freshness of gaze which is attuned to 'difference' and hence there is a particular sensitivity towards the facts, actions and words that become(s) data. In contrast, the subsequent involvement with people, who are much more than just 'informants', makes us less likely to observe and more inclined to participate. For me, living in a theatre community was a sort of dream come true. I had to work at counteracting the feeling that observation was 'lower' than participation. Moreover, when I performed with the group, both during and after the end of my 'official' fieldwork, I (often) realized I was participating totally, forgetting about research work. Observations came afterwards.

Co-performance, in which the ethnographer dances, sings and acts with the local group, is considered basic in order to unveil embodied knowledge about the performance tradition and foster cultural rapport (Conquergood cited in Edmondson 2007:10; Turner 1975:28-29). It is in fact a common feature of anthropological research on performance (Askew 2002; Barber 2000; Cole

2001:10; Afzal-Khan 2005). Edmondson (2007), who opted not to perform with her informants, claims that the methodology of co-performance is outdated, just like the ideal of a single-site ethnography. It is in fact associated with the ambiguous concept of cultural rapport, that is 'the notion that the researchers finally succeeded in crossing the cultural threshold and were welcomed with open arms' (2007:10). Marcus remarks that the 'ice-breaking' moments in which the anthropologist crosses the cultural boundaries reifies both the boundaries themselves and the binary opposition of self/others, resulting in 'a proper mise-en-scene of fieldwork — a physically and symbolically enclosed world, a culture for the ethnographer to live within and figure out' (1998:109).

However, in my view, dismissing the symbolic value of participation is equally a simplification of the politics of the field site. In my case, co-performance just happened. I had not planned it in advance, as I was aware of the potential conflict that may arise in role allocation. However, when I was asked to perform with the groups I usually accepted. Aarohan had a tradition of incorporating foreigners in their plays. I was the third foreigner playing the tourist role in *Dreams of Peach Blossom*. The first was a visiting American scholar and the second a Danish advisor who had previously worked with the group. I also acted in an allegorical silent street play in January 2006 (Chapter three). In the summer of 2006, I played both the American Ambassador and a UN expert in a series of political street plays both in the streets and in a civil society mass meeting. With the Maoist cultural groups, I often danced during their internal programmes or rehearsals but I declined to sing in a mass meeting, using poor singing skills as my justification (Mottin 2010). However, in another programme at the Nepal Academy, I was invited onto the stage during the last dance, and I accepted.

Researching performance inevitably exposes the researcher to the public gaze. My own experience with combining both researching and performing revealed that the ethnographer's membership or 'perceived' membership to the group was intensified. When I set out to observe the performances of other theatre groups and interview their actors, I could not get the same access as I had had in Gurukul. I was perceived as being too close to Gurukul, and was thus positioned within the pre-existing power politics of competing theatre groups. Such differences can also be attributed to the fact that I did not spend as much time as I had spent in my first site with other theatre groups. I cannot claim that I always understood more about the performance practices whilst co-performing. In some cases I received insights as to which questions were worth developing with the artists off-stage. In others, I could distinguish more clearly the differences between what had been rehearsed and what was actually performed. After performing in the political street plays with Aarohan, for example, I realized that my perception of the risks involved was much lower than that of the actors, but I wouldn't have felt this had I remained off-stage (Chapter three). Moreover, performing together increases familiarity. For example, the day after dancing with the Maoists at the Nepal Academy, I

interviewed a theatre actor associated with the Academy for my work on 'mainstream theatre'. He was with a friend, one of the technicians who had worked during the previous day's Maoist programme. Recognising me, the technician asked me about the Maoist performances. When I explained that I was working with them, he commented that it could not have been only 'work'. They must be my 'friends' because I knew everybody and we had a lot of fun. In reality, many of the people he had seen me socialising with I had met only once: I had danced during an internal programme, and so had spoken with many people, who subsequently came to greet me. They 'knew' me but I did not 'know' them. Visibility, however, allows for subjective and diverging interpretations.

I do not even want to claim that during co-performance I 'crossed the cultural threshold' of my informants but on both sides boundaries were certainly softened. I think there were important moments during the performances in which our separate identities were recognized and accepted as such, and in which both cultures co-created a 'shared history'. Sharing a 'history' is important to create familiarity. Performance creates 'out-of-the-ordinary' situations. They are quickly remembered and referred back to. In both field situations, when I was introduced to strangers, actors mentioned the plays in which I had acted with them. Similarly, while talking with Maoist artists they often recalled the first time I danced with them. Substituting the idea of fieldwork as a contained location that the ethnographer manages to enter, Marcus employs the term 'complicity' to describe the contested negotiation that takes place across the cultural divide in which cultural difference is emphasized rather than elided. Marcus suggests that 'it is only in an anthropologist-informant situation in which the 'outsideness' is never elided and is indeed the basis of an affinity between ethnographer and subject that the reigning traditional ideology of fieldwork can shift to reflect the changing conditions of research' (1998:119). While discussing the ease with which foreign researchers are incorporated into West Africa popular theatre, Barber, Collins and Ricard (1997:xi) emphasize the importance of asking questions such as 'Why are we being allowed, or encouraged, to participate? In what capacity? On what terms? In the political economy of the fieldwork, it is precisely because of the 'foreignness' that local groups capitalize on the presence of the ethnographer amongst them and include them in their performance, as a 'commercial attraction' (Edmondson 2007:11) or simply as a 'foreigner'.

Co-performance creates membership. I was fully aware of this situation during my fieldwork. My fieldwork sites, with both Aarohan Theatre Group and with Sen Chyan Parivar, were to some degree, conflictual. At first, I tried to invite artists from both groups to each other's programmes, attempting to create coherence among my *dramatis personae*. When I understood some theatre people's uneasiness towards the Maoist programs, I realized my need to talk, to share my experience and make people connect, was not reciprocated. When I recounted to the Maoist commander, who

became my main informant, that I was in the habit of telling Aarohan people where I had been and what I had been doing, he mildly scolded me, saying that I should not tell anybody. He did not mention any reason. It was just not good. In fact, since 2005, my biggest problem had been a sort of relational loneliness, of not being able to communicate across different 'worlds'. Artists in Gurukul were friendly but for the first year of my fieldwork conversation did not move beyond daily problems, food, clothes or rehearsal. When I joined the INSN, I heard and witnessed harsh situations of abuse and torture. But I could not share them with my Gurukul friends. Indeed, I had to keep living inside the compound as if nothing was happening. My tension grew. Together with the problems related to my fieldwork experience in general, I had two panic attacks. For me, it was terribly difficult to lead 'separate' lives but simultaneously be alone. I could play with characters on stage, but I could not reconcile my *dramatis personae* off stage, in 'real life'.

The fieldwork process is described as the 'gradual and partial assimilation of unfamiliar practices' (Hoem 2004:1), to a degree where the new information is transformed into internalized knowledge, much of which exists in embodied form. In this process, the unfamiliar routines, gestures, postures and expressions that one gradually adopts during fieldwork become unconscious habits; that is, they are reproduced automatically and without reflection (*ibid*). It is often regarded as a change in physical habits, such as bowing, walking, greeting (*ibid*). In addition to the embodied aspects of culture we become familiar with 'internal rules' that are rarely articulated because they are taken for granted. This means creating a new 'social personae' for oneself (see also Hastrup 1989; Goward cited in Hoem 2004). Slowly, I learnt that not talking about my Maoist work with theatre people was not 'faking', it was just another way of experiencing communication. It was only then that I felt I was a little bit 'Nepali', that is, that I could co-exist amidst different realities, and negotiate the impracticality of exchange between 'front' and 'back' stage (*cf.* Chapter two). I had to embody what for me was an 'oppression'. Whilst avoiding postmodern-style confessionalism (Geertz 1988) I will treat my experience as data (Seizer 2000), as my reactions, feelings, and fears no doubt affected my informants' as much as they did to me.

3.3. Just a shallow play?

There are many competing metaphors for the role, or, better, the 'non-role' of the fieldworker. Many are negative. The fieldworker is regarded as a spy, someone who betrays confidences, or reveals other people's secrets (Hoem 2004: 3; Hastrup and Ramlov in Hoem 2004: 3). Others are more

positive: a Hermes, a cultural translator, a healer or a broker, one who mediates between worlds and contributes to knowledge (Crapanzano 1986; Tyler 1986). A frequent insinuation, be it veiled or overt, is that of 'stealing' knowledge.

Knowledge in fact is often perceived in personal and even economic terms, as personal property. Early on, I was confronted by other people's expectations: a development advisor working with the theatre group approached me suggesting I should give the group 'something back', such as teaching. I never did because the actors never asked me. I offered my opinion during discussions or rehearsals, but never engaged in any kind of formal 'teaching'. The development worker also asked me if I had the money to translate my future book into Nepali so that the actors could access it. But to be honest, a month into my fieldwork, my worries, money issues and concentration were universes away from my future book; I did not even know if I would last till the end of the fieldwork. I often had the feeling that I was receiving only 'part' of what I needed to know about doing theatre in Nepal. Some stakeholders probably felt my presence as a threat and dismissed my questions with a few words. They were 'protecting' their practical 'knowledge'. An actor once refused to tell me in detail me his experiences, successes and failures of acting in *kachahari*. He wanted to write a book about it himself. I respected his feelings and did not inquire further. Creating trust may take a long time. He greeted my return in July 2006 as a sign of commitment. He told me that I was not like other foreigners who promise to come back but do not actually return. Therefore, he could tell me more about *kachahari*, which he did.

I was also confronted by thinly-veiled obstructionism when I tried to interview some theatre scholars: requests for appointments were postponed, and requests for phone numbers were diverted to third parties, all the while offering great compliments about my work. I decided not to play their power games, and did without the interviews. During the various festivals that took place from 2004, I was never invited to talk or host a public welcome as were many foreign guests; I was also never asked to write in Aarohan magazine *Nepathya* (backstage):

When I arrived in Gurukul in 2004, I said I had never acted in professional theatre, just in amateur groups. I ended up acting with the group anyway and thus 'participating'. In 2006 I acted in a commercial feature film. I got a lead role through my 'non-theatrical' connections. My partner in the film was Biraj Bhatta, a popular Nepali film star. I realized then that the degree of my co-performance was a rather 'shallow play'. During the shooting of the film, I had much more agency than when I played with Aarohan. I was free to question directives that I did not agree with, I could refuse to accomplish certain movements to safeguard 'my role' and I was able to express myself. During my fieldwork, instead, I was bound by ethical guidelines that obliged me to accept without questioning too much, and make decisions that would not 'harm' my informants or create problems for them in the

future. My agency was limited. I 'played' the anthropologist, not the actress. In fact, artists in Gurukul greeted my participation in the film with mixed comments. I heard a complaint about the fact that I got such a big role after having spent only two years in Nepal. It was not fair, an actor added, they should have cast his wife; she was also white-skinned. However, her Tibeto-Burman features would have prevented her from being recognized as a foreigner. I realized my acting with Gurukul was 'safe' and 'guided'. I did not threaten anybody's opportunities, as I had done with the film. This unexpected experience made me realize that despite my 'co-performance', my actual participation had been limited. My position of 'participant' was perceived as 'harmless' to the real management of resources and work possibilities.

3.4. For whom does the 'rite of separation' work?

Theatre is not a disseminator of truths but a provider of versions

(Barker 1989:44)

Dwyer argues that in ethnographic writing it is fundamental to 'confront rather than disguise the vulnerability of the Self and its society in the encounter with the Other' (1982). Distancing myself from my field 'role' in order to write was a process fraught with difficulties. I realized I had incorporated my role. In Gurukul I was closer to the students than I was to the management. Thus I found myself struggling with how to reconcile the contrasting narratives that were present in the group. The 'harmonious theatre group' was a dominant narrative that was circulating among the media and foreign visitors coming to Gurukul. A counter-narrative of conflicts and inequalities circulated in private and its disclosure could potentially harm my informants, some of whom, nonetheless, urged me to write about them. The silence on the latter was justified in the name of the respect that had to be shown to the older guru (Chapter five). Moreover, when I returned to Nepal and Gurukul after the end of my fieldwork, my membership was frequently reinforced in public. I was asked to perform again, which I willingly did, and I was introduced as a 'group member' rather than a 'guest'. For my informants there was no separation between the fieldwork period and the post-fieldwork, it was rather a continuum in relational terms; it was life. I felt challenged by conflicting duties: being 'loyal' to both the group and to what I had seen, heard and experienced. Anthropology can be perceived as 'anti-social' (Mosse 2006). Thus, I consider my ethnography, like a theatre piece, as a version of reality.

4. Conclusion

In this introduction I have located both theoretically and regionally the theatrical performances that I will describe. I have also situated myself with regards to the theatre communities with whom I spent time.

The second chapter plunges the reader into the middle of the event that profoundly impacted on my work, the state of Emergency declared by the king in 2005. It represented a unique opportunity to explore the conditions that led to the development of political street theatre in the 1980s as well as other previous oppositional public performances.

The third chapter describes the theatrical aspect of political state repression. It will then move to an analysis of performative street protests as well as political theatrical plays. A dramaturgy of protest will be outlined together with the life experiences of the actors that participated in them.

Chapter four introduces development theatre. It provides an account on the localization and appropriation of a global theatre form, Forum Theatre. The way in which Forum Theatre is adapted into *kachahari natak* is also described. I will then introduce a comparative overview of Maoist theatrical performance.

Chapter five will also provide an account of the organizational development of the theatre group with whom I lived during the period of my fieldwork and the challenges artists face in professionalizing their passion.

I will conclude by drawing together different theatrical experiences that co-existed in 2005-06: political theatre, development theatre and revolutionary performance.

SPACING OUT

Universes of worlds as well as worlds themselves may be built in many different ways.
(Goodman 1978:5)

Listen to other people's opinions about the King but never tell yours.
(Identity withdrawn, Kathmandu, February 4th, 2005)

On the first of February 2005, around 10.15 am, I was walking back to Gurukul after a Nepali language class. As I entered a shop on the way, I heard a voice speaking from the radio. I could not fully understand what he was saying but *prajatantra*, 'democracy', was a word the male voice uttered repeatedly. People inside were listening in silence. I did my shopping quickly and left, without fully grasping what was going on. When I entered the Gurukul courtyard I saw Sunil Pokharel sitting on a chair near the hay shed, attentively listening to the radio. Tension filled the air, so different from the cheerfulness I had left a couple of hours before. Some of the actors were sitting near Sunil. 'It is finished' – said one of them with despair – 'our fight for democracy in 1990 has been useless.'³⁸

In fact, at 10 a.m., king Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev used the government-run media, Radio Nepal and Nepal TV, to declare a state of Emergency throughout the whole country under the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990, article 23(7) on the grounds that 'a serious crisis had

³⁸ Nepal achieved multi-party democracy in 1990 after 28 years of partyless Panchayat system (Whelpton 2005; Hutt 1994; Adams 1998). In 1996 CPN (Maoist) declared People's War against the state that ended in 2007. For more on the conflict see Thapa and Sijata 2003; Hutt 2003; Thapa 2004; Dixit and Ramachandaran 2002; Karki and Bhattarai 2004; Centre for Investigative Journalism 2004; Seddon and Karki 2003.

arisen threatening the kingdom's integrity and security'. He suspended the right of freedom of opinion and expression, assembly and movement (art.12), press and publication rights (art.13), rights against preventive detention (art.15), the right to information (art.16), the right to property (art.17), the right to privacy (art.22), the right to constitutional remedy (art.23) and formed a council of ministers under his own chairmanship. During his 40-minute proclamation to the nation, Gyanendra sharply criticized the political parties for their inability to solve the Maoist insurgency and hold elections. Legitimising his actions through the history of the Shah dynasty and referring to the age-long bond between the king and Nepali people, he promised to restore multi-party democracy within three years.

Soon after the king's speech, land and mobile phone lines – both local and international - as well as the internet service were cut. The valley remained in total isolation for seven days. Tribhuvan International Airport was closed and the security forces blocked the main roads leading out of the valley. Army soldiers occupied the offices of TV, newspaper and radio stations to censor broadcast and printed information. In the following days, there was no *bandh* (blockade), the newspapers, their pages thinned, showed images of Nepal's wonderful weather or the traffic in Kathmandu. Rumour spread suggesting that hundreds of politicians and activists had been arrested. Some were under house arrest, others with the police.

Despite this impressive action the capital was calm. Most shops remained open even on February 1st. Soldiers in riot gear patrolled the streets but no significant protest was reported, except for clashes between students and police in a campus in Pokhara and in Butwal. I could not understand why the citizens were not reacting, why everybody was accepting the violent act of isolating a whole nation and seizing absolute power. On the contrary, people seemed to be leading their lives as if nothing had happened. 'It is more of a problem for the people in Kathmandu. In most of Nepal, in the villages, they don't have phones anyway so it doesn't make a big difference,' I was told. 'All westerners think in this way. Here in Kathmandu people are waiting to see what happens and are hoping that he [the king] can improve the situation. Democracy as it was before was no better. Here people are really fed up with the power struggles between the political parties. Many people have gained in the past years. Now the king's men will, what's the difference?'

I was starting to realize the thick layers of 'western' presupposition that prevented me from understanding this seeming non-reaction, and the need to detach from my ideals of 'freedom' and 'democracy'. Gyanendra was taking a great risk. According to the people I talked with he would either restore peace in the country or run the risk of losing his crown. Sometimes dramatic circumstances require dramatic solutions, a theatre actor explained to me, quoting the Nepali saying *vara ki para*, 'either one way [the parties] or the other [the king]'.

I asked what was the difference between the Emergency of 2001 and that of 2005. 'But that [2001] was a democratic Emergency decided by a constitutional king,' said an artist, 'this one is different. It is a despotic Emergency decided by a despot'. He added 'there were rights here in Nepal. Now we have lost half. We are not men any more. We are treated like animals'. Such opinions were expressed against a background of fearful restraint. Sunil confirmed it was dangerous to talk openly although I could not perceive the risk. The previous evening in a restaurant he had stopped a political conversation with other artists, resuming it later in the private space of Gurukul. There might have been spies; even the phone calls could be under police surveillance. Talking freely even with the members of their partner theatre groups outside the capital was impossible. Besides, Aarohan had been politically active during the People's Movement in 1990 and therefore they had to be careful.

There was an atmosphere of suspicion and fear in Kathmandu but at first I failed to notice it. In Gurukul life continued around everyday activities: rehearsals, performances, and daily conversations. The political situation of the country was not the object of open discussion. I often talked about politics with a development adviser who passed me fresh information from her INGO. 'They [Nepalis in general] don't realize the gravity of the situation', she once commented—a remark that reminded me of a phone conversation I had had with an information adviser from an INGO based in Italy in September 2004, just before leaving for Nepal. I was trying to understand whether the conflict would prevent me from carrying out my research. 'It is hard to understand' she had said, 'Nepalis never say anything about the war. They say everything is fine. Maybe they don't understand what is happening'.³⁹

All in all what could be noticed was the huge gap between how reality 'seemed' or was 'spoken about' and how it was 'perceived' in private; how it was 'interpreted' by foreigners and how it was 'lived' by Nepalis. I did not notice any danger but it was apparently dangerous to talk freely. I did not 'see' any visible reaction in the form of immediate street protests but the following months proved, in fact, that the activists' reaction was prompt and powerful. Most important, 'silence' and 'non-reaction' had a significance that needed to be understood and I will explore this in chapter three. But first a flashback, to provide a politico-historical context to the Emergency in 2005 and the role played by art and theatre in order to give words to the silent 'non-reaction' and unveil the cracks between 'appearance' and 'reality'. We need here to investigate the interface between politics, power and theatre, and trace the specific historically and culturally constructed qualities of the public and private domains in Nepal.

³⁹ Although the comments may say more about the advisors than about 'the Nepali', interpreting silence as assumed ignorance recurred.

What I want to argue is that a long experience of autocratic rule in Nepal had created multiple 'stages' in which communication and dialogue between the public and private domains were conditioned and filtered (Burghart 1993). Because of the experience of 'not being heard', citizens voiced concerns and objections in extreme ways, either secretly, through underground activities, or through public but 'spectacular' demonstrations in which the streets became highly contested political spaces. Political power, space and artistic performance intermingled in intriguing ways. According to Hindu religious tradition, the streets are shared by humans and gods, and their union is reasserted publicly through processions and rituals (see Chapter one, section 2). Actors in particular, having the possibility of 'becoming' gods, are endowed with immense transformative power. Folk artists used songs and dances as a medium of subversion, as cultural critique and for the reassessment of dominant ideologies. In such a political culture, artists' transformative and metamorphic skills grant them privileged access to forbidden public spaces and allow them to engage in creative forms of political resistance and opposition.

My central argument, therefore, will focus on how theatre and performance became a means of entering the public space in 'disguise', of overcoming or fooling the government's control, and of amplifying the voice of the speakers in the same way as mass meetings and strikes do. The aesthetic space created by theatrical performances turned the dominated public space into a space of possible social transformation.

1. The Panchayat 'counterfeit' world

On 16 December 1960 King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Deva assumed emergency powers and dismissed the Nepali Congress government that had been elected with a substantial majority only 18 months earlier. Arguing that parliamentary democracy was alien to Nepalese traditions and unsuited for developing the country, Mahendra also arrested the prime minister, banned all political parties and suspended the constitution. (Burghart 1993:1)

Richard Burghart's description of King Mahendra's take-over in 1960 strikingly anticipates Emergency 2005: history sinisterly repeated itself. Burghart introduced two concepts to describe the Panchayat rule: 'public life as counterfeit reality' (1993:9) and 'the conditions of listening' (1996). Since these notions will be useful to understanding Emergency 2005 and to my analysis in chapter three, let me begin with their more detailed explanation.

Burghart (1993; 1996) explains how Mahendra's banning of political parties in 1960 aimed at erasing any 'rival interpretations of the popular will', thus allowing the king to lead the country through the partyless Panchayat democracy⁴⁰ without facing any public form of criticism. The government manipulation of the 'public' and 'private' created what Burghart called 'public life as counterfeit reality' (Ibid. 9):

His Majesty's Government legally and ritually represented the body politic. Public order was understood to exist in unity. It follows that the private is something that does not speak for the collectivity and can only be countenanced in the public arena when permission has been granted by the government. In common parlance the private was characterised by self interest (swarth). In European society personal interests are openly expressed in public places, either individually or collectively by political parties and voluntary organizations. Public order is maintained by the counterbalancing of interests. In Nepal, though, public order was defined by unity. Antagonism and conflict of interest could not, therefore, be openly expressed in the king's body politic.⁴¹ (Ibid. 7)

What emerges from the description of the Panchayat period is a dominated public space (Cornwall 2002:3) where citizens' participation to the country's political life was induced (Ibid.) but guided by specific regulations that obliged them to enter the public sphere wearing a 'mask'. The king's power was exercised by preventing conflictual issues from becoming the subjects of open discussion. He determined the agenda of what was public and thus debatable (Lukes 2005). Only unity and harmony were permitted in the public domain in order not to disturb or break the royal fiction of unity. Political parties were considered the expression of the self-interest of their leaders and supporters. So they were outlawed. For example, the government regarded newspapers voicing party opinions to be private. When entering the public space, they had to be subjected to the government censorship (Ibid.). In contrast, state-run, 'public' newspapers like *Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal* published news supporting the public image of such a unitary state. Other 'private' institutions – in the form of meetings, publications and public events – were allowed to enter the public space in the 'appropriate' way, only with the government's permission (Burghart 1993; 1996). The state monopolised both the legitimate use of force and the performance of public service, a right that is handled by civil society in Western democracy (Burghart 1996:303). In this context, the private space was safe and hosted the

⁴⁰ The Panchayat system was intended to be a form of 'guided democracy' as Mahendra believed the country not ready for a multi-party system. The base consisted of over 3,000 villages, electing a village/town executive council or panchayat. Each would elect a district representative. The district assembly would elect a district panchayat. District panchayats would form a zonal assembly from which the members of the Rastriya (national) Panchayat were elected (for more information see Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton 1999:76-78). The aim was to grant some kind of popular representation while at the same time ensuring that executive power remained in the hands of the king (Ibid.).

⁴¹ In Chapters 3 and 4 I will discuss possibilities/limitations presented by theatre in opening up conflicts due to its public nature and the fear of an unregulated public associated with it.

organization of dissent. Activists were usually arrested only when they entered the public space (Ibid.).

Throughout the 30 years of Panchayat rule, the levels of repression varied from year to year. Yet, for my analysis I want to concentrate on the last decade (1980-90), the period when theatre groups entered the streets and started a 'street theatre movement' (see section 1.4). Burghart argues that a certain gap between the rules governing the system and its practical work is part of the 'fiction' of the modern state (1994). Yet, in Nepal, after 1980, this crack became so huge that 'the structures of Panchayat democracy began to acquire a fictional character' (Ibid. 11). The referendum that in 1980 confirmed the continuation of the Panchayat system, though by a slim margin, can be taken as an example. I want to quote Burghart's description at length because it clarifies my fieldwork experience and spells out how political resistance was organized underground, in the backstage, from a 'private' position.⁴² What was mirrored to the royal eyes was only what the ruler wanted to see and what the ruler allowed citizens to reveal at least in the capital — that is unity and order.

The fact that the political parties were able to mobilise the electorate for the multi-party vote in the referendum meant that although being 'illegal', they were nonetheless tolerated within limits by the state. Both the factionalism among the *panchas* and the tolerance by the state of the political underground created a half-real political world where things were not what they seemed. By having to fight against political parties to win the referendum the 'Panchas' — that is to say, the local leaders who were reputedly above politics — had to fully immerse themselves in it. By fighting against the collectively organized parties, the Panchas became effectively a political party of partyless people and Nepal was transformed from a partyless democracy to a one-party state that was run by the partyless party.

Meanwhile, despite their illegal status, Congress and various leftist groups were able to operate fairly openly within the country. Congress boycotted the 1981 and 1986 general elections, objecting to the requirement that all candidates be members of one of the 'class organizations'⁴³ set up under the panchayat system and to the ban on standing avowedly as the representative of a party. It did, however, field candidates (as partyless individuals) in the 1987 local elections and won a number of seats, including the mayorship of Kathmandu. The duly elected party members, however, were later removed from office by the government upon their refusal to take part in public processions on 16 December.

This was the day when, from the government's point of view, Mahendra gave (panchayat) democracy to the people, and when, from the parties' point of view, the government took (parliamentary) democracy away. Meanwhile, some leftist groups campaigned in the national elections, and managed to return candidates in a few cases where their network of activists was particularly strong, as in Bhaktapur constituency in 1981 and 1986 and Chitwan in 1986.

In the minds of the Nepalese intelligentsia the work of the political parties had become an 'open secret' and the hidden work of the state revealed that public life was a 'counterfeit reality' (Ibid. 11).

⁴² Even in the 1979-1980 open protests would take up a performative turn, i.e. the street poetry revolution (Hutt 1993)

⁴³ The five (later six) social classes recognized and financially supported by the Panchayat system were women, peasants, workers, students and ex-servicemen (Burghart 1996:304).

The outcome of the elections showed that control was not systematic. Providing the politicians wore the 'official mask' and played the 'role' required by the system, they could win elections. They lost their places only when they refused to acknowledge in public their support for the king, when they went 'out of role'. However, there were loopholes in the system which were skilfully exploited by political activists. It was not a totally dominated space. In fact, theatre activists took advantage of discontinuities in surveillance to enter the public domain, as I will detail in the next sections.

But Burghart raises another key issue that helps explain the interaction between private and public space, what he calls 'the conditions of listening', that is the 'way one ought to speak if one is to be heard' (1996). Burghart underlines how the conditions of listening are taken for granted in European social thought, following Habermas' assumption of ideal communication being based on a community of speakers having equal access, becoming a moral community, or civil society evaluating the state's action from an external position (Ibid.). The scenario is different in hierarchical societies where the moral authority conditions the possibility of being listened to:

If we assume that the king or the highest authority in the land has the voice of authority and is also the listener, then how is it for others who may wish to speak up? They cannot speak with the voice of authority. They cannot speak from a platform upon which they will be listened to. In Nepal one can take the discourse of the people, on the people, to the king. In this discourse how is it that the subjects come to have a moral authority to speak? Here equality is not given; rather it is just seized and if it cannot be seized then the king will listen. (Ibid. 302)

Because the possibility of speaking and being heard was filtered, theatre, dances and songs offered masquerade platforms to voice political concerns in the otherwise deaf public space as I will describe in the sections to come. Under the royal autocratic regime, the public space was not a proper public space, in Arendt's sense, as no plurality was allowed. According to Western tradition,⁴⁴ modern individuals, at home in their private space, consider the public as their outside. The outside is the place of politics, where the action of the individual is exposed to the presence of others and there seeks recognition; that which Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958) calls 'the space of public appearance'. These arenas are spaces where people and ideas come into public view and worldviews are shared. Arendt's 'space of appearance' is where the plurality of views develops and critically engages in a 'multi-dimensional understanding rather than sublimating private interests to a singular "public good"' (Donovan cited in Cornwall 2002:6).

⁴⁴ Drawing from Aristotelian distinction between the *oikos* (the private realm of the household) from the *polis* (the public realm of the political community).

During the Panchayat period, criticism was comparable to disloyalty and could not be publicly uttered but only kept in one's mind, 'expressed in private within the family or among close friends' (Ibid. 307). Alternatively, criticism was rephrased in the public domain in ways that could be acceptable such as through silence, irony, insincere praise, procrastination or officially saying yes, but then delaying the enactment: 'one has a headache, one's daughter is getting married, etc.' (1996:306-7). Similarly, the government or king's speeches were received with suspicion⁴⁵ and could not be taken at face value but had to be tested against the intentions of the speaker, 'the king cannot speak formally to the body politic: rather he must speak formally to everyone, for he represents everyone' (1996:308). Burghart concludes: 'Public life is the realm of truth, but it must be a truth concealed in its intention' (Ibid. 309). Intentions had to be concealed in the public/non public space and carefully crafted symbolic street dramas paradoxically managed to keep real intentions hidden from the space code while simultaneously communicating a message that resulted unmistakable to the audience (see 1.4). Communication between audience and actors took place on the 'representational space' (Lefebvre 1991) while simultaneously following the opposite rules that governed the public according to the authority's 'representation of space'. Theatre provided a powerful moral space for political criticism. The 'representational space' became a space for social transformation.

Bringing back Arendt's notions, dramatic acting of oppositional plays and songs can be conceived not only as an attempt to defy the regime or 'communicate with the king'⁴⁶ but also as a way of finding an audience, of regaining a plurality banned by the rulers, of re-establishing a community by creating an alternative 'space' for dissent; in other words by 'appropriating' the dominated space for a short time. Plurality was found on a different spatial level, not in the banned physical space but on the representational level, engaging in 'cultural remapping as a form of resistance' (Giroux cited in Schutz 1997). Elaborating Burghart's concept (1996:318), I think it is this spatial dimension that makes theatrical forms of criticism such as symbolic demonstrations and street performances, as a form of consciousness, both theatrical and 'critical'. Criticism is achieved through actions, although the intent may be hidden in public. It becomes 'embodied and performed consciousness' involving the whole being in action.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See Chapter three, sections related to the royal speeches during April movement 2006 and the gap between the international community's enthusiasm due to their inability to grasp the real meaning of the King's words as against the population's and activists' disappointment.

⁴⁶ As with the teachers' token protests described by Burghart (1996:312)

⁴⁷ See a discussion on the role of emotions and hope in mass protest and performance in Chapter three.

2. Multiple stages: art as politics

*One day comes once in an age,
It brings overturning, topsy-turvy and change,
The mute and the meek begin to speak, to move their lips of sorrow*
(Gopal Prasad Rimal in Hutt, 1997:191)

Gopal Prasad Rimal composed this poem during the Rana period. It would be later put to music and sung by *janbadi* artists during the Panchayat time. The song was sung also during the people's movement in 2005 and the first line has become a symbol of victory, thus linking the rebellions against autocracy across time. I have cited only the first lines, and will say more about Rimal later on. What I want to illustrate in this section is how popular art was used to convey political critique in times of authoritarian rule and controlled space. Not only theatre but also songs and readings create an aesthetic space that can be useful to question authority on other spatial levels. I will provide several examples from both the Rana and Panchayat eras to suggest the existence of a strong stream of subversive performing art in Nepal turning the aesthetic space into a significant locus of social change. Lefebvre claims that etched in every space are the traces of its production, its 'generative past' (1991:116). No newly created space can be totally free of previous assumptions and meanings (Cornwall 2002:7). So, this historical background provides the key to understanding the context in which political theatre emerged both in the 1980s and in 2005.

Just like the Panchayat era described in the previous section, the Rana rule cannot be reduced to a uniform pattern as far as degree of freedom of opinion is concerned. The system of internal intelligence with secret agents and spies set up by Maharaj Jang Bahadur Kunwar Rana (1846-1856; 1857-1977) characterized the whole age, despite periods of varying imposition (Rana 2000). Jang Bahadur himself is said to have walked in the capital disguised as a common citizen for surveillance purposes. Except for Deb Shamsher (March-June 1901), most of the Rana prime ministers discouraged education as a tool to keep people under control (Ibid.). Chandra Shamsher (1901-29) imposed restraints on poets and writers and established the 'Gorkha Bhasa Prakashini Samiti' in January 1913 (Ibid. 118).⁴⁸ While having a censorship function, the organization was also founded to encourage publication activity. From that moment, every literary work, including poems and stories had to be approved by the Samiti board before publication. Suspicion also entered religion. At the beginning of the 20th century, Chandra Shamsher had Nepali members of the Indian

⁴⁸ He also founded Gorkhapatra, the first daily newspaper.

reformist religious movement Arya Samaj arrested, suspecting political motives beyond religion (Ibid. 121). Bhim Shamsheer (1929-1932) is said to have feared intellectuals as enemies (Ibid. 133).

Political activists assumed 'masked roles', used acting skills and the ambiguities allowed by artistic language to overcome the restrictions imposed by the Rana regime (1846-1951) and to reach the public space. In 1920, several people were jailed as the result of publishing a booklet entitled *Makai ko kheti* (The Cultivation of Maize). Among them, the publisher Krishnalal Adhikari died in prison while serving a sedition charge (Hutt 2002:1689; Shamsheer Rana 1999:117; Seddon and Karki 2003:5; Upreti 1992:25-28). No copy of the booklet exists today. Yet it contained allegories that the rulers interpreted as criticism and called for social and economic reforms, including land reform and the launch of a new technique for cultivating maize, from which the title derives (Ibid.). Only Juddha Shamsheer (1932-45) softened the controls and allowed publication of Nepal's first literary magazine, *Sharada*, in 1938, although contributions had to be approved by the Nepali Bhasa Prakashini Samiti before publication.

Popular criticism of the ruling classes was silenced or 'phrased' in politically acceptable terms, as in the case of the non-violent rebellion led by Yogamaya in Bhojpur, East Nepal in the 1930s (Aziz 2001). Yogamaya was a female ascetic who led a campaign for reform and justice, attacking both caste discrimination and state oppression (Ibid.). Her only means of 'campaigning' were songs, particularly the *hazurbani* that she sang when she awakened from meditation. Yogamaya attacked the political and social system legitimized by Brahmanical values,

*When greed and malice fade,
The earth will tremble, the corrupt will fall.
Teen sarkar,⁴⁹ hear my verse.
It's time for justice. (Aziz, 2001:42)*

She awakened the political desires and hopes of many young people who abandoned their caste rule to follow equalitarian principles. Yet, when Yogamaya directly questioned the ruler with her 26 demands, the Prime Minister sent troops who arrested her and her followers. She was banned from singing *hazurbani*. 68 people drowned themselves in the Arun River as a continuation of their non-violent protest. Any reference to the sacrifice of Yogamaya and her followers was banned by the authorities until the 1980s, when Aziz undertook her fieldwork. Yogamaya was represented and dismissed as morally inferior, a religious fanatic, a frustrated widow, a prostitute or a communist, not

⁴⁹ The Prime Minister Juddha Shamsheer Rana.

as a rebel at all (Ibid.). Yogamaya questioned the rulers through religious and artistic means, and the rulers, fearing her threat, not only crushed the protest but also obscured its significance (Ibid.).

In the early 1940s, activists of the Praja Parishad⁵⁰ manipulated religious readings for political purposes. Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton (1999:7) report that Shukra Raj Sastri, one of the first martyrs of Nepal, read passages from the *Mahabharata* in front of an audience of 400 to 500 people in Asan Tole or Indra Chowk.⁵¹ The heroic struggles between the people and an unjust ruler were meant to prompt the audience to political action. Members of the Rana family hid among the spectators in poor men's clothes to spy. However, this dissident action ended a few days after it began. Kedar Man Byathit observes that 'in his lecture Ganga Lal⁵² had overstepped our rules and gone into direct political agitation' (Ibid.). In Nepal, being a Hindu kingdom, authorities used religious festivals to legitimize their rule (see 1.2). Religious festivals could therefore become a relatively safe space for staging critiques of oppression and for raising awareness, forging community bonds and mobilizing collective action, provided they were conveyed in a veiled way. The king, in fact, could not easily stop them, without undermining the very performances that reinforced his divine role. Political activists could thus voice dissent through forms that were acceptable by the rulers, providing their 'intentions' remained hidden. Yet, as we have seen, going 'out of role', or, as I would like to suggest, 'out of space', led to the arrest of Ganga Lal.⁵³ In fact, as soon as the 'mask' protecting his challenge was lowered, the system could not allow any public, open defiance.

For sure, during the Rana period artists themselves used the aesthetic space to question autocracy. But when the poet and playwright Gopal Prasad Rimal (1918-1973), who directed the monthly magazine *Sharada* around which young democrats (*prajatantrabadi*) gathered, openly shouted slogans supporting democracy in the streets along with other artists the authorities removed him from his position (Malla 2007). Rimal went even further and engaged in awareness raising artistic actions, influenced by the revolutionary poet Siddhicharan Shrestha. Rimal started singing revolutionary *bhajans* with other artist friends in different temples of Kathmandu to motivate people to struggle against the regime (Ibid.). Prachanda Malla recounts that when the Rana discovered the ploy, they sent all these artists to jail. The following is one of the *bhajans* sang at the time by Rimal:

*Oh Goddess Durga, mother of the world, open your eyes and look
Can you see the internal situation, how can I say you are blind!
On our condition, on our trouble/bad luck, please look just once*

⁵⁰ Praja Parishad is an underground anti-Rana and pro-democracy political party established in Kathmandu in 1935.

⁵¹ The main junctions in the old part of Kathmandu.

⁵² Another martyr from the Praja Parishad

⁵³ Like the party members elected in 1996 but dismissed for not participating in the public procession in 1.2.

Reform this country, there is hope here, make all brains clear
We are Nepali, Nepal is ours, raise this feeling in everybody (In Malla 2007)

Prachanda Malla argues that after being released from jail, Rimal committed himself totally to politics (cf. Hutt 1991).

At the time, playwrights Balkrishna Sama and Bhimnidhi Tiwari introduced dialogues against the Rana in their plays (Ibid.). As the actor Prachanda Malla remembers, suspicion surrounded public dramatic performances in general,

The Ranas were a very big problem for drama players. If there had been any dialogue against them they would have cancelled the plays. They would also cancel the lines that they didn't like, stopping the plays and putting actors in prison, beating them. Ratnadas Prakash and Bekhanarayan were put in prison. They didn't do any political play against [the Ranas] but sometimes there were some dialogues against them (Prachanda Malla, interview, November 2006)

Nepali authorities did not issue specific laws such as the Dramatic Performances Censorship Act (1857) in colonial India (Bhatia 2004) or Franco's Law on Chamber Theatre and Theatrical Rehearsals (van Erven 1988:147) to control theatrical activities. Yet, the presence of officials in disguise and, subsequently, the artists' arrests show that they were well aware of the potential threat deriving from cultural and dramatic performances.

Let me return briefly to the question of political songs and cultural programmes. Since the 1950s Gopal Prasad Rimal's and other poets/singers replaced lyrics centred on love and nature, or celebratory praises for the rulers with lyrics based on the social reality of the time, depicting the hardships common people had to face or anticipating a better future. Siddhacharan Shrestha's 'Mother I am not mad'⁵⁴ or Laksmiprasad Devkota's 'The golden day will rise one day' each represent the core out of which grew a very productive stream of political music known as *jantaka git* (people's songs) and progressive songs (Rai 2060 B.S.; Grandin 1994; 2005). In the year 1958 Gukul Joshi and Dharma Raj Thapa started a joint *gitiyatra* (singing tour) taking their songs to different regions of Nepal (Rai 2060 B.S.). 1967 marks the establishment of Ralpha, a musical band including Ramesh, Rayan, Arim and Manjul (see section 2.3.2). They sang songs denouncing social oppressions, injustice, corruption as well as the malpractices of the Panchayat system. Songs that had been composed for awareness-raising, later became popular for their artistic quality and quickly spread across the country (Rai, *ibid.*). In a way, they are the musical antecedents of the revolutionary songs

⁵⁴ Hutt (1997:18) points out that while the poems Shrestha wrote in the 1940s were clearly political, his later production was also seen in political terms. For example, his most famous poem *Mero pyaro Okhaldhunga* (My beautiful Okhaldhunga) nostalgically describes the life of a child in East Nepal praising the village life. Hutt remarks that '[i]nevitably, it came to be regarded as a political statement, although it could equally be argued that it means no more than what it says' (Ibid.).

performed by the Maoist cultural groups (see Mottin 2010) and those sung during the people's movement in 1990 and in 2005 (see Chapter three).

Art entered the political culture in an organized during the Panchayat rule, when political parties were banned and their leaders were underground, as a way of mobilizing the citizens through the work of the cultural fronts. During the Panchayat, in fact, political leaders were active and organized their party work from a 'private' position to avoid arrest. Political parties who decided not to stay underground like the Congress, could meet and debate but 'under the pretence that they were not actually political parties' (Whelpton 2005:111). Yet, the possibility of exchanging information between leaders and their activists is crucial to sustain party politics, especially in the periphery. Access to political information took place mainly through personal relations. The Nepalese electorate was composed for the most part of illiterate peasants.⁵⁵ Establishing connections with influential people and groups at local level (Whelpton 2005:94), as well as creating networks of activists,⁵⁶ made the difference among political parties. Gorkha Parishad⁵⁷ and Nepali Congress were reported to have 800,000 (in 1953) and 600,000 (in 1956) activists respectively out of a population of 9 million (Ibid.)⁵⁸. The Communist Party, instead, was estimated as having about 5,000 members in the fifties⁵⁹. Both the Congress and the Communist parties, however, had effective nationwide networks through both political activism and student unions. In fact, despite the ban on party politics, in the 70s the administration's level of tolerance of political activities varied according to personal differences within the government and tactical evaluations by the palace (Whelpton 2005:107).

Political parties were able to convey messages that could not be openly expressed by politicians and activists by adapting the flexible format of the cultural programmes (*sanskritik karyakram*). Cultural programmes were deeply rooted in the oral and folk culture traditions which are so vital in Nepal (see Mottin 2010). Cultural workers – *sanskritik karm*⁶⁰ – artists and activists aligned

⁵⁵ Literacy rates in Nepal 1942-1991 (population over 10 years of age): 1942: Total (T) 0.7%, Male (M) n/a, Female (F) n/a; 1952-4: T 5.3%, M 9.5%, F 0.7%; 1961: T 8.9%, M 16.3, F 1.8; 1971: T 14.3, M 24.7, F 3.7; 1981: T 23.5%, M 34.9%, F 11.5%; 1991: T 39.8 %, M 56.2%, 23.5% (Hoftun, Reaper and Whelpton 1999:96).

⁵⁶ It is interesting to notice that 40 years later personal communication at local level still has a crucial importance in Nepal. Sudhindra Sharma and Pawan Kumar Sen (IDA) carried out an opinion poll between December 2006 and January 2007, sampled across regional and caste/ethnicity, gender, religion, age differences, to document the level of knowledge among the people at large on the processes and contents of constituent assembly. Here are the answers to the question 'Where do you get useful information about elections?' 38% media, 22% local party cadres, 18% local informed individuals, 10% family members, 7% don't know/cannot say, 4% election commission (www.nepalresearch.com visited on May 8th 2007).

⁵⁷ Originally a Rana 'revivalist' party, after Mahendra abolition of parliamentary democracy in 1960 many of its leaders joined NC (Hoftun, Raepier, Whelpton 1999:387).

⁵⁸ Whelpton deems the figures inflated and while he considers Gorkha Parishad's figure 'merely fanciful', the Congress' was the result of a recruiting policy allowing anybody to remain member after paying 1 rupee once.

⁵⁹ The Communist party worked through a cadre system whose membership was based on strict selection (Hoftun, Reaper and Whelpton 1999:58). However, there were many sympathizers belonging to associated fronts and bodies that played an important role while the party was underground. One of the most important associations, the *Akhil Nepal Kisan Sangh* (All Nepal Peasants' Union) claimed 143,000 members in 1954 (Gupta in ibid.)

⁶⁰ Still nowadays many actors define themselves as 'theatre workers'.

with the political parties were grouped into teams and travelled the whole country performing in the villages. They sang both *janataka git* (people's songs), as well as songs of their own creation. In a camouflaged way they publicised subversive political messages. Folk songs and dances were said to be immensely popular, especially in the villages, where few other means of entertainment were available. While even cultural workers were obliged to follow the rules of the 'public', their position was highly fluid, like professional chameleons skilfully playing around with 'public life as counterfeit reality'. They managed to survive through disguise, for example having double identities, different names and changing repertoires according to the context. When police were nearby, cultural workers sang folk or love songs, and when the police had left, their repertoire switched to 'progressive' songs. Artists with dances, songs and dramas were at the front of political propaganda. If artists were welcomed by the people of a particular area, afterwards activists would bring in literary magazines and books. During the Panchayat period, cultural groups were particularly strong among leftist parties but after 1990 political parties used them extensively for propaganda only during elections. Most left parties, like UML or Jana Morcha, established well-organized and active cultural fronts.⁶¹

Some theatre artists started their career performing as cultural workers during the Panchayat period or immediately after 1990 and somehow now have detached themselves from this partisan use of art. Nonetheless, political parties constituted a lively cultural and artistic laboratory. Other artists, already popular at the time, joined political parties and supported their ideals but resisted pressure to convey open political messages in order to preserve the 'integrity' of their craft. These experiences are truly valuable to understanding the arts' potential for social change, to understand local forms of cultural critique, to locate historically the present-day politico-artistic practices, and to understand how socio-political performances became traditions/practices out of necessity to resist the state rules. The first narrative that follows is about an artist who worked as cultural worker for a leftist party during the Panchayat and subsequently struggled to become a theatre actor. The second describes a singer who was a member of the popular band Ralpa and travelled Nepal performing *janataka git*, 'people's song' in the 1970s but struggled with the limitations imposed by party membership.

2.1. 'I met a god'

⁶¹ CPN (Maoist) still has a strong cultural section (see Mottin 2010).

Bijay Bisfod⁶² is an extremely active, witty and energetic actor. He has experimented with theatre and social commitment for most of his life. When in September 2005 I asked him how he got involved in art and politics, he immediately said that he was a cultural worker for the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist, unlike other artists who often hid their affiliation or avoided mentioning the exact name of the political party they supported, or had supported. Indeed, he was the first person who openly addressed the usually avoided sensitive issue of the relationship between art and politics. Bijay also made clear that he was still a communist, although at the moment he was not associated with any political party.⁶³ Ideological affiliation needed not be expressed in party membership, especially during a conflict.

Bijay explained that he was an active political worker back in 1984. Following requests from political leaders, artists created songs, poems or plays, to match the different interests of the spectators and to fill the political programmes. Cultural workers did not receive financial support from the political parties they belonged to (cf. Chapter five), they were fed and given shelter by the villagers they met along their trips (Interview, September 2005).

Cultural programmes took place in open spaces but they were obviously not authorized. Therefore, artists had to be skilful and invent ways of showing an open identity that could be acceptable to the security forces, but at the same time maintain their political purpose. In their forms of resistance, cultural workers were using the same tools as the government, playing masked games: cultural workers disguised as traditional musicians, secret agents disguised as villagers, in games of reciprocal deception and credulity. Just as decades before, political activists read religious texts in public, and government officers mingled in the crowds disguised in rags. Front and backstage worlds were easily interchangeable: multiple identities, multiple roles, multiple costumes and plenty of tricks. For example, Bijay recounts that his group was to provide progressive books to the rural areas. At the time, most Russian books were banned. They had to carry thick volumes by Lenin, Marx, Mao, or Chekhov. But how? Having hidden them inside a drum (*madal*)⁶⁴, they managed to pass the police check post without trouble. However, once they reached Therathum (East Nepal), they found themselves in an isolated area, in the cold of winter, far from any lodges or houses so they took shelter under a tree. Bijay continues the story with words laced with a sense of risk and danger: 'There was no environment for sleep. We were also hungry, no food... Five villagers came to our tree. They thought we were scheduled caste Damai, so they gave us money and requested us, 'please, we

⁶² *Bijay* means 'victory' and *Bisfod* means 'blast' — a revolutionary pseudonym still used by this artist in his daily life.

⁶³ In October 2008, he told me that when we first met he was associated to the CPN (Maoist) but at that time he could not tell me so.

⁶⁴ Typical Nepali drum used in folk music.

like entertainment, give us entertainment', ... We laughed in our clothes, the villagers were CID, secret police' (Interview, September 2005)

So, political activists entered the political space through an artistic cover. Their 'invisible theatre' performances, unlike Boal's interventions, were not supposed to provoke society through 'fictitious' theatrical ways; rather, the invisible theatre of the cultural workers protected exactly those who were carrying out a real political revolution in disguise.

Artists' representations depict the affection of villagers for these cultural workers. 'People loved us' is a frequent remark. Moreover, villagers are represented as innocent and honest people unable to grasp the meaning of their cultural groups' representation. Because they arrived from Kathmandu, the centre of power, far away from the village and because of their artistic skills, Bijay says that artists were seen as 'quasi-gods', as those who can 'change the problems'. Having an almost magical halo, they not only received hospitality reserved to the guests but also respect to the point of making Bijay feel 'guilty' for not being able to fulfil such high expectations, and for just bringing 'political messages'. He is still touched by an encounter with a villager in a remote village in Okhaldhunga, East Nepal. Soon after the cultural programme, a 'father' approached him with tears in his eyes. Bijay could not understand the reason. The man replied 'I met a god', suggesting that the cultural workers were like gods because they went to rural areas to change society. 'But I think they didn't know the whole story', comments Bijay bitterly. In fact, he regards villagers as having a literalism that recalls Boal's peasant (see Chapter one), who were unable to understand representational devices.

Bijay explains that soon after the democratization of 1990, especially during elections, dramas in particular became monothematic, open and explicit: 'give us votes', 'this is a good party', 'we will make the government'.⁶⁵ The social space had changed. There was no longer need for tricks or symbols. The year 1990 interestingly marked the beginning of a deep crisis in the street theatre movement as well, because of the changed political conditions. Yet, while cultural workers moved towards more open political propaganda, theatre artists engaged in social theatre in connection to NGOs, but both lost their edge (see Chapter four). Let me now turn to the second case that widens the historical background to contemporary performance-based politico-cultural practices, that is the travelling poet and folk singer Manjul.

⁶⁵ For political party rhetoric in the 1991 campaign see Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton 1999:176-78.

2.2. 'Art for life's sake'

If Bijay's narrative illustrates the experience of a cultural worker associated to a political party, Manjul provides a different perspective as he is a famous singer who for a limited period of time was associated with a political party but later detached from political art. Manjul started his career as a folk singer. With an independent group of friends, he travelled extensively as 'troubadour' in the hills and mountains of the country for nearly two years collecting folk songs, singing 'people's songs' and receiving a great success. 'I got such a nice education. I got such knowledge of my land. I learnt so many good things about my people, I was changed and I think that was the golden time of my life' Manjul tells me with pride. With the story of Ralpa, the band Manjul established with Ramesh, Rayan and Arim in 1967, we enter the famous terrain of *jantaka git* (Rai 2060 B.S.; Grandin 1994; 2005). The group became extremely popular all over Nepal and then, in the late 60s, connected to the cultural front of a leftist political party. Their status and identity, however, were different from other cultural workers. Manjul's account helps further our understanding of two issues that I have already introduced: the contested boundaries that connect political art to party politics and a hierarchy of genres within Nepali society.

Song-writing has a long tradition in Nepal, connected to both folk and political culture. However, in the late-1960s song-writing was considered as a 'lower' form of art compared to writing poetry, and hence less prestigious in society. In Manjul's words, poetry had and gave 'more honour'. In fact Manjul remembers being discouraged in his desire to write songs. Nonetheless, following the tradition of Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Madhav Ghimire he started writing 'songs that are not only songs, they are like poetry, but they are not poetry, they are lyrical, they are singable, half they are songs' (Interviewed in English, November 2006). Manjul continues 'they [the songs] were not superficial. We tried to make them very meaningful and with good message, but we were not interested at all in being sloganist, propagandist. We were interested in creating our real art' (Ibid.). For Manjul, 'real art' is the art that is 'true to life', no matter artists' political association. He provides an example:

I read my poems with Sarwanam outside Kathmandu. Many people thought that we belonged to the same party but that was not true. I told Ashesh Malla [the director of the group]⁶⁶ 'eh, these people are saying.... [we belong to the same political party]', because our art was very close. We were true to the people. One day, I was making a campaign for the Communist party, and I presented a drama written by Ashesh Malla. Later we won in that area, and I said 'Asheshdai, our party won in those many places because of your drama'. And he said 'We [close to Nepali Congress] are singing your

⁶⁶ The poet and the director mentioned were close to opposite political parties.

songs in so many places and we won'. People sometimes belong to different parties but if they are very true to life, if they are real friends of the people, they are close. Many times they are together. (Interviewed in English, October 2006)

Both songs and theatre were stigmatized forms of art linked to the lower classes. But both theatre artists and singers often belonged to high castes. Therefore songs were to be sanitized, devoid of 'sloganist' connotations, and made 'meaningful', in order to find a place in the real world of art.⁶⁷ Manjul is keen to mark the difference between his group and other cultural groups connected to political parties. His preoccupations reveal the controversial relationship between artists and the political parties and an attempt to differentiate himself/his group from party cultural workers. Manjul describes how the group, and him in particular, took the decision to become associated with one of the Communist parties of the time.⁶⁸ They accepted the invitation to perform in a leftist mass assembly. Yet, Manjul and another three people were arrested. Policemen thought he was a politician, but the Communist people of the area pushed for his liberation on the ground that he was 'an artist'. Manjul remembers them saying 'he is not a politician, he is an artist, he used to sing our songs, so why did you arrest him?' But Manjul adds that they claimed he was not going to make a revolution, while in practice, with his songs, he was. This incident affected the artists' identity:

Earlier we were not saying we are Communist, or Congress, anything, at the beginning. When we started to sing we were very close to the Congress, but we were not Congress. Later on we were very close to the Communist, but we were not Communist. But that incident encouraged me so much, me, Ramesh and Arim, and so we started to think maybe we need to be their friends, we should not have a separate identity, a separate name. [...] The movement that had started from Jhapa⁶⁹, we joined that. We were very close to that but later we took their membership as well but other friends had other groups. (Interviewed in English, November 2006)

Manjul's experience offers an interesting example of the interface between art and politics, of the blurred space existing between using art as a means of discussing social issues and the easy, real or assumed, association to political parties. In this case the artists' position is ambiguous: it is true that they were not politicians or activists but was not singing political songs and speaking on behalf of the underground leaders a political activity? Yet, as Bijay suggested, ideological commitment and party politics could not always overlap. Or were artists themselves playing tricks, situationally moving between spaces. This may explain the difficulty of assessing the artists' 'party' membership,

⁶⁷ Theatre artists had to move towards literature and foreign playwrights to gain prestige (see Chapter one).

⁶⁸ For background info on CPN and its splinter groups in late 1960s see Seddon and Karki (2003).

⁶⁹ Manjul refers to the uprising in the early 70s when a group of student activists from Trichanda College in Kathmandu started a revolution modelled on the Naxalite line of 'elimination of class enemies' and executed some landowners in Jhapa district (South East Nepal). The group included Radha Krishna and Chandra Prakash Mainali, Mohan Chandra Adhikari and Khadga Prasad Oli (Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton 1999:83-84). Some group members were arrested and shot 'while attempting to escape' (Ibid. 84).

questioning whether boundaries could be drawn at all. An example from the time can spell out the problem. There are no recordings of those concerts but storytelling was much a part of the musical performance itself, and it was indeed political (cf. Maoists' practice in Mottin 2010; Chapter four). Songs in fact were preceded by an introduction and the Master of Ceremony (MC) accompanied the audience on a journey, as Manjul explains:

I mostly used to handle the MC part, the announcement, not only the song but I used to speak about the song as well. Not the explanation of the song. [For example] if you are going to New Road, my duty was to take you up to the New Road gate, this way, this way, you are going to this and this kind of place, up to New Road gate. It is your duty to enter New Road gate and to enjoy New Road. So New Road was our song, I could take you up to the gate of our song. After listening you should enter. I was very good. Even now many people use to say the introductory part was much nicer than the song, the way they used to listen, the way they used to applaud. (Ibid. October 2006)

The role of the Master of Ceremony was particularly important as there was no freedom of speech and political leaders were banned from talking in public spaces. Since only artists could speak, they therefore carried political messages. Manjul remembers, 'I used to speak as a political leader. I used to give messages and the people used to ask me. If I went to Biratnagar, people used to ask me [to speak in their name]. Our friends were banned, they could not speak, so they said "please say this and this and this", so I used to speak before singing the song' (Ibid. November 2006). What was therefore the difference between a singer speaking as a political leader and a proper leader? What boundaries did both Manjul, as an artist in the 1970s, and Ganga Lal as a politician in the 1940s, overstep when ending in jail? The example given above shows that artists lived with multiple identities although sometimes the artistic cover was not enough to spare them arrest, and police officers managed to read beyond the performance, perceiving a threat to the system.

Cultural programmes were important in creating and keeping networks and connections between the political leaders and their potential supporters. Cultural programmes offered opportunities for fund-raising and also functioned as gate openers for subsequent, more in depth political work. Since political parties could not organize demonstrations or mass meeting they used cultural programs with a double aim. On the one hand, to popularize their messages and for mass mobilization, on the other, to raise funds to publish literary magazines that would be distributed in the countryside by political activists:

The political workers who were underground used to carry our songs, you know, they used to play them. They could read the mood of the people, the psychology of the people. More than half of the people have become communists because of

our songs, the songs that my group sang, the songs that our friends' groups sang. They were so powerful, it was the only way. (Ibid. November 2006)

Art's independence from political parties is a much debated issue in Nepal. In politically charged moments, the tendency to categorize people according to their party sympathies is strong and carving a space out of such games is complex, as I describe in chapter three in relation to the Aarohan Theatre Group and in my account of Maoist Cultural Groups (2010). However, the content of poems and dramas written by artists close to opposed political groups may have been very similar, if not interchangeable. Ideological position was not always what made the difference in the political parties.⁷⁰ Yet, 'differentiation' was remarkable and had consequences in daily relationships. Striking the balance between art, craftsmanship and message is what the audience normally perceives as the difference between party propaganda and 'art for life'.⁷¹ Manjul explains that any kind of environment is politicized and he also claims that despite what some people may say, 'in Nepal no tradition of independent thinkers, writers, and performers exists'. In a way or another, everybody is 'under some political party'. Manjul does not regret having worked for political parties. He recognizes that as artists they were helped by the parties to reach the people, as they wanted to. It was a reciprocal exchange: 'we helped them, they helped us'. However, at present, and despite what he said, he believes that artists should have an independent space. His position seems at first glance contradictory. He repeatedly remarks that no independent thinker can survive in Nepal, and at the same time calls for independence. It is interesting because he does not complain about the lack of independence of the song content, but rather of the performance 'space'. It is the different contexts in which even the same songs are sung, that give the songs different meanings. It is as if, now that the climate is different and there is freedom of speech in comparison to the Panchayat times, the 'mask' that was protecting the artist-activist had to be dropped. The game should be over for him, no more time for camouflage. In fact, while supporting the 2005-06 popular movement, Manjul never performed during cultural programs, not even those organized by the civil society (see Chapter three). What he lays claim to is an independent artistic space where artists can perform their songs independent of political leaders' speeches. In the next section, I will describe the beginning of the street theatre movement in Nepal, in the early 1980s. Artists describe it as an attempt of doing theatre with a civic engagement, although party politics hovers once again. The beginning of street theatre can also be associated to the growing of a politically engaged and active civil society in Nepal.

⁷⁰ The Panchayat state also made strenuous efforts to co-opt artists, with considerable success, and much of the literature it sponsored was also revolutionary in tone, though this was aimed against common enemies such as illiteracy and poverty. The Royal Nepal Academy is the prime example. Poets such as Rimal and Manjul took part and even won prizes in its annual competitions (Hutt, personal communication).

⁷¹ The same criteria are used to differentiate 'NGO theatre' from theatre for social change. See Chapter three.

3. Into the streets: theatre for political change

ghumdai, phildai, naachdai, gaundai, ayau, aja ayau (2)

jay jay jay jay natyashwori (2)

natak gardai, natak bachdai, ayau hami aja ayau

sadak sadakma gardai sadak sadakma puja gardai

khbardari gardai ayo hami, ayo hami khabardari gardai

jay jay jay he natyashwori

travelling, returning, dancing, singing, we're here today (2)

glory, glory, glory, glory to natyashwori (2)

doing theatre, living theatre, we're here today

playing road to road, doing puja road to road

to give a warning we're here, we're here to give a warning

glory, glory, glory, glory to natyashwori

This is an old song, a prayer to Natyashwori, a call to the god of theatre, created by Ashesh Malla 25 years ago. Since then, Sarwanam's actors still sing it before starting their street plays to call the people around the square and announce the arrival of the group. It is a song that epitomizes the essence of a strong stream in Nepali theatre, a theatre of streets, of journeys, of dances and songs, of religious commitment, a theatre of warning and a lifestyle in itself. Controversies surround the beginning of street theatre in Nepal. While some artists claim a 'Nepali origin', as I will detail below, others admit an Indian influence as two Indian theatre groups performed in Kathmandu in the early 1980s. The 1980s in fact represent a very creative period of activist, militant political theatre in India with the emergence of powerful groups like Janam in New Delhi (Hashmi 1989; van Erven 1992; Epskamp 1988; see Chapter one). Here I will introduce the beginnings of modern political theatre in Nepal through the narrative of Ashesh Malla, who is considered the pioneer of the street theatre movement that developed in Nepal in the early 1980s. Nepali street theatre is credited with a strong political origin. Malla explains that it developed among university students out of a disdain for the system and anger, the political critique springing out of personal pain:

At that time, two Nepali Congress activists were hung by the government.⁷² I knew one of them, he was from Dhankuta [his home place]. King Birendra had him hung. I felt a great rebellion inside my heart against the Panchayat. That time I wrote

⁷² The two Congress activists were hung in February 1979 (the death sentence was passed in 1977). They had been captured in 1974: one was 'the leader of a group of armed infiltrators' arrested in Okaldhunga while the other had been involved in an attempt to assassinate the king (Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton 1999:87). In April the same year, students demonstrated in front of the Pakistani Embassy to protest against the hanging of former president Zulfikar Ali Bhutto with the activists' hanging in mind. Students clashed with the police and the incident triggered off other strikes (ibid, 88). Tribhuvan University was closed and police entered a student hostel in Amrit Science Campus and violently beat students. Student complaints, general dissatisfaction and protests in other districts led King Birendra to consider the students'

the second drama⁷³, *Murdabad Utheke Hathharu* (Hands Raised in Protest)... After writing the drama we performed at the university auditorium in Kirtipur. At that time it was not possible to criticize the Panchayat system, the king, the government [...]. We played for three days, on the third day, the royalist students started beating us harshly and tortured us, on the stage and the government banned the play. Then I wrote a short play and we performed it at [the] university as well, but again it was stopped by royalist students.... There were two types of students, one royalist and the others [those against]....Police supported them [the royalists] (Interview, November 2006)

After playing *Murdabad Utheke Hathharu* (1981), Ashesh Malla wrote and performed several plays at Tribhuvan University and with some other friends felt the need to form a theatre group. Sarwanam (Pronoun) was established in 1982. Their engagement with political theatre continued and the next hit was *Sadakdekhi Sadaksamma* (1984) performed inside theatre halls. It portrayed the social situation of the country, describing a day in Kathmandu from morning to evening. The director explains that there were no actresses available,⁷⁴ no halls, no light systems or technical facilities, no money and, instead, a severe censorship curtailing artists' freedom of expression. The play ended with a plea to the audience: 'Sorry, we could not perform the drama, please come tomorrow'. Actors' strong motivations, however, gave them forbearance in the face of difficulties. Ashesh Malla continues:

How to change the political system, how to reach the people, what is the alternative? What can we do? And suddenly we went to the streets. Then we started street theatre for the first time in Nepal, 1983-84. In Kirtipur, there is a ground, Coronation Garden, we performed *Hami Basanta Khojiraechaun* (We are Searching for Spring). All students were there. Sunil [Pokharel] was also there, I wrote the play and did the direction. The first street play, everybody was surprised because the presentation was very new.

What I did was [placed] 4 artists sitting, like here [he shows me], and I was the sutradhar⁷⁵. I told the people [audience] that I was going to start the drama and first thing I would open the curtain and I did like this [hands joint in front of his chest part as if opening a curtain] and two people enter from each side. We did theatre through body movements. We used body movements for the first time in that play. So we discussed about the name to give this kind of theatre, and we said it must be called *sadak natak* (street theatre). So that's how *sadak natak* was born in Nepal (Ibid.).

requests. Further disturbances led the King to announce a referendum to choose between the Panchayat System and multi-party system in May 1979 (ibid, 89).

⁷³ Ashesh Malla had written his first drama in 2063 BS [1975-76], *Tuwalale Dhakeko Basti* (The Village Covered by Clouds, 1984). The play was performed in Dhankuta for a week and then travelled in different districts in the East (Dharan, Biratnagar, Janakpur, Birganj) before being performed at the Academy in Kathmandu for a month. Ashesh Malla said that while other actors returned to Dhankuta, he remained in Kathmandu and started an MA at TU in Kirtipur.

⁷⁴ Playing in drama was not considered as a good activity for women (see Chapter five). Ashesh Malla confesses that in most of his early plays there were no women roles because of scarcity of actresses (Interview, November 2006).

⁷⁵ The *sutradhar* is a facilitator, connecting the actors to the audience and vice versa, or commenting like a chorus the unfolding of events. Many street plays present the role of the facilitator who gives explanations or question the audience.

Sarwanam's artists soon started to perform out of the Kathmandu Valley, in the month-long *Nepal yatra*⁷⁶ (journey) that they would establish as an identifying feature of the group. Playing outside Kathmandu was even more difficult because of the police and the censors. They managed anyway because as soon as the play was over, the actors left for the next location by bus. The police would usually come after the play and by the time they arrived the actors had already gone. Even back in the capital they faced problems from time to time, with authorities warning them to stop playing. But, they did not. Circumstances also shaped their theatre artistically. What Ashesh Malla is keen to highlight, is that the artists decided to move to the street out of necessity, or 'compulsion', as he says, not out of choice:

Theatre itself creates the stage, the circumstances. Theatre is inside self-creative of the stage and we performed on that stage. This is street theatre. We could easily perform anywhere and manage to give our message with aesthetic sense. That was not an experiment, that was a compulsion. People say, 'it's experimental drama', but I say 'no experiment, it's my compulsion'. How can it be experimental? I don't have a stage, I don't have money, I don't have technical support. I was searching for alternative theatre and that was alternative theatre for me, it was also easy. We did theatre, [...], moving from one place to the other, it would have also been difficult to bring the set, how to make artistic and powerful drama then. We thought we had to use our body and afterwards we searched and made whatever we needed (Ibid.).

Sarwanam and Aarohan are pioneers theatre groups in Nepal. They are still active, working in and from the capital. Their paths have crossed, for example - Sunil Pokharel was a lead actor in Sarwanam before entering Aarohan, but they have profoundly different identities. From the beginning Sarwanam took a clear political stance for democracy and based its identity on physical street theatre outlined above by its director. Aarohan⁷⁷ instead, concentrated more on proscenium theatre, staging plays with social values and symbols, while occasionally doing street dramas. If the political environment and 'spatial' framework conditioned the development of modern Nepali theatre, theatre artists questioned the disciplined space of the regime and posed serious threats to its credibility.

3.1. Theatre with a mission

As we have seen, under the Panchayat, government censorship was harsh and did not allow for any public challenge. Theatre groups had to comply with the norms of the system. Before each performance the state administration required actors to submit copies of the script to three different

⁷⁶ Poets had travelled outside of the capital to encourage their peers also in the *Sadak Kavita Kranti* (Street Poetry Revolution of 1979 (Hutt 1993)). It will be a recurrent modality, see Chapter three.

⁷⁷ More on Aarohan Theatre Group development in chapter five.

places to get permission to perform: the CDO (central district office), the Nachghar (National Theatre) and the Zonal Administration Office.⁷⁸ The officers carefully scrutinized the texts to identify objectionable passages and handed the scripts back, requesting actors to omit or alter the controversial parts. Unlike in British India (Bhatia 2004:20), in Nepal officers did not always follow up on the theatrical performances to make sure the corrections were implemented. Artists played around these incongruous practices.

There were in fact several techniques to elude censorship. For example, actors gave one script to the censors and performed a totally different one, or played the same dialogues but imbuing them with different meaning through body language. Sunil Pokharel remembers an example:

In a play there was a dialogue in which one intellectual said to a young boy 'you have to support the system', the political system. They were happy when they censored it. Of course there was no wrong thing so the censor passed it. Then, when we performed it, what we did was 'you have to support the political system' otherwise [show a choking gesture with the hands] several gestures so it became clear for the audience that otherwise you would be killed. At that time they hadn't any system to document the performance, you know, so the next day if they called us we would say 'no, we didn't do that'. There wasn't any evidence, any concrete evidence. (Sunil Pokharel, interviewed in English, March 2005)

Using physical actions to transform the meaning of words in the script was a device Ashesh Malla also used widely:⁷⁹

At that time *Sadakdekhhi Sadaksamma* (From the Street to the Street) was heavily censored, many pages. There was a dialogue marked in red pen, it says... 'Mantriharule hamilai chirchan', which means 'the ministers suppress us'. They cut the dialogue. So what I did on the stage was [he mimes a sequence, first pointing the forefinger of the right hand up a few times, to indicate 'those above', the ministers; then he holds the neck a few times with the right hand again, and afterwards with both hands squeezing and turning towards opposite sides mimes the action of strangling; finally he repeats the sequence a few times, adding kicks towards the person being strangled and ends with open hands suggesting there is nothing to do, no hope] and then clap began and censorship could not do anything.....[we laugh] (Interview, November 2006)

Another way of evading censoring authorities was using allegories and metaphors that the audience would easily recognize but that were apparently innocuous to the system because the challenge was not open and artists could use metaphors as masks. Coded and allegorical language also

⁷⁸ The Zonal Administration Office – Zonal Commissioner (*anchaladhi*) was part of the Panchayat structure and was dismissed after 1990.

⁷⁹ The Spanish radical popular theatre group Els Joglars practiced mime to convey their political critique to Franco's regime. The security forces did not know how to handle it as this form of theatre was new in Spain (van Erven 1988:159)

characterized the poetry and literature of the 1980s (Hutt 1994). Similarly, oppositional theatre during Panchayat time made extensive use of coded language.⁸⁰ For example:

Sometimes some words like 'the old tree' or 'the old house' were symbols for the political system, the Panchayat. The 'sunrise', the 'new branch', and sometimes the 'new flower in the spring', 'spring' in particular was the symbol for democracy, so we used a lot of those [symbols].... Sometimes they stopped the play of course. Many theatre groups and people were supporting the old political system and some are still, even in this new political situation they are there, but for the people who wanted to have the democracy it was a mission theatre... (Sunil Pokharel, interviewed in English, March 2005)

Ashesh Malla takes his *Ma Bhaneko Hami* ('I' means 'We') as an example of how he used allegorical language to attack the most powerful person in his country. He was inspired to write the play by an accident, when a statue of a god in Bhaktapur was stolen. It was an open secret that it had been taken away by the king. So he used symbolic language to portray a character with two faces to show his duplicity. The play was performed without ever mentioning the keyword 'king', by utilising a long practiced habit of hinting rather than stating plainly. While affirming that the police did not understand the symbolism, he claims that his choice was not at all experimental, rather a 'compulsion' (Interview, November 2007).

Artists mentioned the inability of the police to understand the allegorical overtones of the plays while the audience seemed quick to pick up the criticism. This gap recalls the 'open secret' of the work of the political parties described by Burghart in section 2.1. Puskar Gurung, at the time an actor in Sarwanam, gives an example of the security forces' assumed ignorance about theatre and their consequent downplaying the threat posed by street plays:

In one of our performances the king was going somewhere, but the security guard sees one weak person in the street [and asks] 'what are you doing?'. The policeman yells and scolds that person. The person says 'I'm just walking'. 'You are doing something, you are speaking, you are speaking against the king, you are speaking against the government', 'No, no, no, I'm just walking here' and then the security guard again accuses him of speaking against the government. Then he beats him very badly and finally he phones the officer to report 'Sir, I found a terrorist here, he was running away, I warned him but he was running so I had to kill him' (Interviewed in English, December 2005).

Political critique was therefore pungent. Many of the actors' narratives of that time depict the police as rather simple characters, unable to read into the representation created by theatre, much like Boal and Bijay's peasants. It is worth asking if turning a blind eye to the coded theatrical messages was, in

⁸⁰ In British India censorship was instead often overcome through a recuperation of historical and mythological themes perceived by the censors as less controversial (Bhatia 2004). Even Ashesh Malla wrote many plays based on mythological stories, like the Mahabharata.

fact, a deliberate choice by the security forces. Did they tacitly comply with the actors by willingly bracketing the 'hidden transcripts', or did they genuinely not understand? Albert Boadella, from the Spanish theatre group Els Joglars, thus explains a similar situation where the police did not understand the satire in their mime performance: 'They thought it was all part of a real circus act. They were pretty stupid, fortunately. The regime was one big bureaucratic, brutal sometimes, but also terribly idiotic. Everybody shoved responsibility onto the next guy' (van Erven 1988:160). Burghart's analysis is once again helpful. He explained that the objective of the government was not to control people's thoughts, but rather their public expression (1996:307). It is possible that the police were thus not required to interfere with the speakers' intentions and therefore bought into the 'show'.

Another method of bypassing the policing enforced by the rulers was to move into 'private' spaces. Sunil Pokharel tells how they performed in the colleges or school compounds because they were safe places that the police would rarely enter because of the students. Afterwards Aarohan chose to perform in the French Cultural Centre, which had a 100-seat hall and a small stage. It was safe because it was a diplomatic space and the police could not enter. Actors also masked their political critique by performing foreign plays to elude supervision. Sunil explains that they chose plays that reflected their present state of mind, that were relevant to them and to the situation. For these reasons, they staged 'Men without Shadows',⁸¹ 'The Respectful Prostitute' and 'Outsider' by Camus. Although the plays dealt with all sorts of absurdities, the audience could easily identify their own situation and how helpless they were in it.

Both in British and post-colonial India the choice of the performance space was often crucial for theatre groups and resulted in an escalation of theatrical activity in private residences and clubs (Bhatia 2004:65). Even Indian theatre groups, including IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) made use of European dramas to tackle political topics forbidden by the government especially in the 1960s and 1970s (Bhatia 2004:51-75) - mostly Shakespeare and Ibsen. Foreign plays became both a means of élitist distinction and a means of resistance (Ibid.). In Nepal, Aarohan Theatre Group in particular opted for this choice. In the subsequent years, they were sometimes accused of preferring 'foreign' drama instead of Nepali, as well as of being an 'intellectual/élitist' group (see Chapter one).

Stories of creative tricks to fool the system are told with pride by many actors. But there are also narrations of the real danger actors were constantly living with, such as when information leaked out to the police because of spies or betrayals. Here is Bijay Bisfod again, this time as a theatre actor and director, some years after his experience as a cultural worker. He staged *Jukkako Adalat* (The Court of the Leeches) a revolutionary drama of his own creation in 1987. They received the

⁸¹ English translation of the original play titled *Morts sans sepulture* (1946).

permission to stage the play because they had given the censors a simple, innocuous text while aiming to perform a different one. But the day before the debut, while they were rehearsing, a person from his group informed the police about the two scripts. The police arrived and arrested all the actors. During the police interrogation, Bijay repeatedly denied the existence of a second script. In fact, the second script was only improvised, not written. Bijay remained in jail for 11 days. Had the second script been written, he would have probably been killed. As I suggested above, the political climate was chaotic, populated by double-faced people described in *Ma Baneko Hami*, by open secrets and double standards. Yet, this double reality seemed unintelligible to the security forces when represented in theatre. They often got lost, displaced. However, such 'masquerade politics' (Cohen 1993) made actors live in a situation of risk and instability, as Bijay explained. If one person 'betrayed' the group, the whole mission would have been at serious risk. The divide between private and public space was fluctuating and governed by rules, both moral and practical.

4. Artists in the 1990 revolution

The role of intellectuals in Nepal's public life changed throughout the decades that led to the 1990 revolution. In 1970, their role was dismissed and they were considered as 'a band of economically castrated and socially limping angels beating the drums of their respective fads' (Malla in Hutt 1993:82). During the Panchayat years academics' compromise with the regime is evident in the political distribution of memberships in the Academy, defined by critics as 'a graveyard of artists' (Hutt, 1994:88) and in the phoney public tributes they were obligated to pay to a system they did not believe in (Ibid.).⁸²

Literary and social movements with political purposes, however, were launched at different times. Poets from *Aswikrit Jamat* (Rejected Generation) in the late 60s renewed literature in both content and tone, abandoning romanticism and mythology for productions based on 'social realism' expressed in informal language (Hutt 1993:85). During the Boot Polish Demonstrations (1974) organized in reaction to an increase of censorship and authoritarianism after the government *Gaon Pharka Rashtriya Abhiyan* (Back to the Village National Campaign), intellectuals cleaned the shoes of passers-by for a week in protest (Ibid.). Finally, in 1979, *Sadak Kavita Kranti* (Street Poetry Revolution) added to the protests of dissatisfaction and anger that led king Birendra to declare the referendum. In the most intense moment more than two hundred poets recited poems in the streets

⁸² Some of them did believe in it, or chose to pretend to believe in it for personal gain (Hutt, personal communication).

of Kathmandu seeking the abolition of the Panchayat system (Ibid.). Hutt points out that from 1979 to 1990 poetry became more open and defiant, and as a result some poets, writers and editors were fined and arrested (Ibid. 87), just like the actors mentioned above. A parallel with poetry is useful at this point, though what can be said for poetry does not totally apply to theatre because of the different nature of theatrical language. Hutt explains that censorship's oppression has probably been somehow overstated by the post-revolution rhetoric because except for some particularly harsh periods, in the late 1960s and late 1980s, critique was accepted if phrased through the acknowledged codes (1993:95). In contrast to poets, theatre artists often exposed the contradictions of the allegories through body language thus making their threat more concrete. Improvisation and memorization of scripts worked to their favour as evidence of their opposition was not available, thus making theatre a more flexible tool of dissent.

The gap between the educated elite of Kathmandu and the rest of the country was deep (Hutt 1993). The situation, however, developed fast after the 1980 referendum⁸³ and by 1990 demonstrations in Kathmandu were followed by protests in other parts of the country in a unified manner: 'Within the space of ten years, the gulf between the private and public, real and pretended, conscience and necessity yawned ever wider, and at last the structure cracked and crumbled' (Hutt 1993:84).

What about the role of intellectuals in the 1990 revolution and of theatre artists in particular? Ashesh Malla is keen to stress the active role played by Sarwanam and the link between artists and politicians. He remembers meeting with artists and Girija Prasad Koirala in his flat. The political leaders warned the artists that politicians would probably be jailed in the imminent revolution, so artists should 'do something'; and they published a book of poems (Interview, November 2006). Even Sunil Pokharel, Nisha Sharma and other actors from Aarohan participated at the sit-in with writers and artists outside Trichanda College in the heart of Kathmandu on March 16th 1990. They sat down with black scarves tied around their mouth to protest against lack of freedom of expression. 158 were arrested but most were released on the same day (Hoftun, Raeper, Whelpton 1999:126). In fact, 'even a token action by people of standing could provide much better publicity than a demonstration' (81). The network of artists joining other professional groups in demonstrations organized by civil society would play a crucial role in the 2006 movement (see Chapter three) but such connection was at work even in 1990.

According to Hutt, however, 'Kathmandu writers were not at the forefront of the democratic movement' (1993:91), though afterwards there were arguments about those who were active and

⁸³ Urban centres and the Tarai area voted for multi-party system while the rural hilly regions supported the Panchayat (Hutt Ibid.).

those who were not. Most revolutionary and pro-democracy literature appeared after 1990 although certainly some joined the protests and paraded in the capital (Ibid.). There are two important differentiations to make at this point. First, theatre artists did not enjoy the same status as poets or writers, because of the written language bias that positioned performance artists on a lower level despite their popularity (see Chapter five). As Manjul mentioned, composing song lyrics and writing poems was different although the first managed to reach a wide audience. Sunil Pokharel's narrative of his personal struggle for recognition is also emblematic of such a bias (see Chapter five), even though doing political theatre was deemed a 'honour-giving' even in the 1980s. Second, 'independent theatre' as we have it now was an emergent genre. Mainstream theatre was mainly linked to the Academy and the National Theatre and thus to the establishment (see Chapter six). As a consequence, it is interesting to note that theatre artists who were active during the revolution – and whose contribution is not always mentioned – constitute the embryo of what is now modern Nepali theatre.

A further point is worth mentioning in this regard. Many of the actors who formed dissident theatre groups in Kathmandu were originally already active in theatre in their home place before arriving in the capital. For example, Ashesh Malla is from Dhankuta and Sunil Pokharel from Biratnagar, both in the South East. Aarohan Theatre itself was first established in Biratnagar where a branch still exists. They did not 'discover' theatre in the capital. Rather, they brought with them their theatrical experience. What I want to suggest is that the Kathmandu-centred research and media coverage risked ignoring the intellectual liveliness of rural and remote areas, freezing them into stereotyped simplification which was useful to both political and developmental representations. Secondly, the availability of higher education infrastructure and the spatial power determines Kathmandu's centrality. Kathmandu was and is still the place to be to be 'seen', to be recognized and to make pressure. Representations of Nepali theatre therefore have to take into account space to avoid misinterpreting the causes for the effects. In my understanding, the fact that modern Nepali theatre is mostly concentrated in Kathmandu has therefore to be seen historically and spatially. Thirdly, I think the concept of 'intellectual', as it is commonly used in Nepal, needs critical assessment. I noticed that 'intellectual' is often attributed to people or works of art associated with written culture, that is writers, academics, and book-based drama. How does the category overlap with that of *élite*? For example, written culture is given more consideration than improvised drama. A hierarchy is at work and it strategically positions people and artistic products. Cultural workers, for example, would not find a place among intellectuals, but yet they created and used art for political change. As 'symbolic creators' they need indeed to be included among the category of 'intellectuals' (see

Bourdieu in Swartz 1997; Mottin 2010). Simultaneously, however, the category of artist works as a recognized shared identifier across political party and social strata.

5. Conclusion

Theatre as cultural performance is deeply embedded in the wider political and social context, not only for themes and ethos but also for presentation, form and language. Nepali theatre in the 1980s had to undergo the restrictions imposed by the Panchayat system. But independent artists found a temporary space for social sharing, a possibility of self-expression and critique that could challenge the authority because of its masked and cunning nature. Analysis reveals strong links between artists and politicians, thus suggesting that theatre as a tool for consciousness raising, popularization of ideas and propaganda was deeply embedded in the Nepali social structure.

Performances were used both by political parties and by activists and citizens to create a space of community and resistance. Artists did not accept a political use of art as value free and the nature of artists' independence from party politics was and still is an open and debated controversy. Political engagement was often motivated by personal experience, but then, the actual protest performances affected the personal lives of the artists involved.

We can notice a double movement and exchange, from the centre to the periphery: cultural workers travelled through rural and remote areas, and thus discovered their own country and people. Artists from different parts of Nepal met in the capital and started the street theatre movement. The 'spatial' importance of the capital has been highlighted.

Before 1990 both stage and street theatre were allegorical, just like Nepali literature in general.⁸⁴ Similarly, cultural workers used to mask their performances to protect themselves. Cultural performances were obliged to follow the 'conditions of listening' of the surrounding 'counterfeit' world (Burghart 1993; 1996). Breaches like going out of role, breaking the fiction, speaking forbidden dramatic dialogues were often punished. But the success of a play in overcoming the authority's supervision depended not only on following the implicit rules of the public space. It was also linked to personal relations as in the case of spying narrated by Bijay. But the opposite is also true, as pointed

⁸⁴ After 1990 stage theatre entered a period of crisis - poets felt a similar experience, see Hutt 1993:95 - some street theatre became 'NGO theatre', cultural workers turned to political propaganda. Once the filters of the Panchayat system were removed, art went through a process of polarization. The symbols left space to outspoken language (see Chapter three).

out by Hutt (1993). Boundaries defining ideological membership were not fixed in time and place: consequences in terms of personal gain were at times hidden behind the wish to please the powerful of the moment or associating and exposing oneself during a political moment. Artistic products were similarly stretched to fulfil the objectives of different agendas, as the case of the poet Siddhisharan Shrestha, Manjul's songs or Malla's dramas.

The question that I raised at the beginning, concerning the 'lack ' of reaction after Emergency 2005, now finds an answer. Emergency 2005 did not only impose restrictions. It also brought back the memories and experiences narrated in this chapter, as well as the practices of the 'counterfeit' world, as Sunil Pokharel explains:

We came through the Panchayat regime. We come from that time. We knew that when something changes abruptly, [we have to] wait a few months at least. Because, if you see, when the king took over power, every activity stopped, but we didn't stop our performances. Even that time there was a rule, more than five people cannot gather. We said 'no, let's do it inside, because it's safer'. Because, you see, in a dictatorship, you try a little, and then see what is the reaction. You go for a little more and then see. It's how you create the space. If you see the newspapers at that time, it's exactly what they did: they waited, started to write a little, then wait and went a little further. That's how things go. Then, also, the huge pressure was to save Gurukul. It was part of a strategy too. Because lots of people needed a space where they could meet, they could talk. [...] So, everybody needed a space. To safeguard the space we needed to do that. Afterwards we used another strategy. When we went to the streets there was a plan behind. If they would stop us, then perhaps someone else outside Gurukul would start something else and we would be behind. (Interviewed in English, November 2007)

'Non-reaction' was therefore not synonymous with passivity but indicative of a practical strategic knowledge. Sunil's analysis can be read together with the theoretical issues raised in the beginning of this chapter. The first action that he deemed necessary was safeguarding an internal but public place. Only afterwards would it have been possible to move to the public domain and start turning the 'dominated' space into an 'appropriated' space (Lefebvre 1991:164-168). The social space is governed by rules, but the application of such rules depends very much on who a person is, according to role and status. Through ambiguities, tricks, tactical transgressions and 'roles' theatre worked as a kind of bridge between spaces: a practiced 'metaxic' space.⁸⁵ Artists became symbolic space-brokers to regain plurality, temporarily halting the domination. Theatre, therefore, provided a spatial 'diversion' (*détournement*) (Lefebvre 1991:167) towards the production of a new space of political criticism. The next chapter will detail how it occurred in 2005-06.

⁸⁵ During a Forum Theatre performance, participants and audience belong both to the 'real' world they live in and to the imagined 'representation' created by the play. The performance arena becomes a metaxic space. Boal describes *metaxis* as follows: '[t]he state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image. The participant shares and belongs to these two autonomous worlds; their reality and the image of their reality which she herself has created' (1995:43): cf. Chapter six.

THE STREETS BECOME THE STAGE: ON PERFORMANCE, PROTEST AND THEATRE IN A TIME OF CRISIS

1. Theatre of/and political struggle

Performance as an artistic 'genre' is in a constant state of crisis, and is therefore an ideal medium for articulating a time of permanent crisis such as ours.

(Guillelmo Gomez-Pena cited in Delgado and Svich 2002)

Theatre all over the world seems, indissolubly tied to crisis (Delgado and Svich 2002; see Chapter one). It is an art that endures financial shortages and is threatened by mass media. Sometimes it is perceived as conventional, repetitive and marginal (cf. Brook 1968) yet it is often alive and active in critical periods (Klaic 2002; Obeyesekere 1999; Van Erven 1988; Van Erven 1992). Carmody asserts

that 'dramatic crisis has become one of the fundamental structures of our [theatre people's] imaginations, one of the intellectual and emotional technologies that allow us to perceive and act on reality', and claims that 'to move beyond crisis is to move outside history, to exit from the stage' (2002:24). Theatre and crisis relate in multifaceted ways. I would like to detail four kinds of connections between theatre and political critique before going into the details of my ethnographic account of Nepali theatre's role at an extremely problematic political moment.

First, theatre language is often employed metaphorically to convey paradoxical or intense moments of social life (Turner 1974).⁸⁶ Inconsistencies in political life are often described as 'theatre of the absurd'. Nepal's civil war — like all other wars - has been depicted as a 'tragedy'. Many journalists labelled the municipal elections that king Gyanendra ordered in February 2006 a 'farce' because in a conflictual environment no free and fair election could take place, despite the claims of royal propaganda.

Secondly, ruling élites use rituals like processions, official ceremonies, formalities, images and stories to give their actions an aura of *charisma* and link them with the symbols and values that a particular society considers sacred (Geertz 1988; Cannadine and Price 1992; Kertzer 1988). Geertz remarks that 'the gravity of high politics and the solemnity of high religious cults originate from similar impulses' (ibid, 155-56). The connection between the governing élites and the system of symbolic forms that express, justify and legitimise their existence and actions is described by Geertz as 'theatre state' (ibid., 157). According to Geertz, kingship is constructed through symbolic domination. For example, chiefs are turned into 'rajahs' by the aesthetics of their role (ibid.). While pluralistic systems allow for competitive rituals and public performances, one-party states depend on the monopoly of all political performance to maintain their power, and are strongly dependent on such public rites (Geertz, ibid.). The theatricality of the state has been the subject of anthropological study (Geertz, 1980, 1988; Fuller and Benei 2001; Gellner 1999). For example, in *Negara* Geertz (1980) reconstructed how the Indonesian state was governed by rituals and symbols and explained how power was exercised through spectacle rather than by force.

Thirdly, sometimes dramatic social or political circumstances colour the streets with highly aestheticized and ritualistic performative protests, actions and parades, outdoing both the theatrical metaphor and organized forms of streets dramas (Wasserstrom 1991; Skinner 2008; Taylor in Cohen-Cruz 1999:74; Durland in Cohen-Cruz 1999:65; Kertzer 1988). King Gyanendra used slogans, radio advertisements, billboards, parades and rituals to display his power, especially after February

⁸⁶ In English the verb 'to stage' is used both to refer to a theatrical performance and to the staging of a rally. Political stakeholders are commonly termed 'political actors'. The 'theatrical' metaphor is commonly employed also in Nepali language.

1st 2005. Similarly, pro-democracy and anti-monarchy movements employed songs, props, slogans, pictures, and rituals to contrast and symbolically demolish the representations of the king's regime. The theatricality of state power was resisted and contested theatrically by the people's movement for democracy. Political struggle was not only fought in the streets through physical and often violent means. It was also a struggle over meanings and symbols, an ideological struggle that became more subtle but also more powerful in the repressive system (see Geertz 1980). Street protests fed theatre artists with images, ideas, and everyday life situations. Theatrical performances picked them up and reflected them back distorted, spurring street audiences to contemplate different perspectives, and 'act' in real life.

Theatre can also enter the streets with political intentions. Political theatre, in fact, has been widely used around the world, during protests, with a subversive and critical function (van Erven 1988:64; Bell in Cohen-Cruz 1999:271), to challenge authoritarian regimes. During pro-democracy meetings that preceded, accompanied and followed *Jana Andolan* 2006, a group of artists called *Loktantrik Shrastaharuko Samuha* (Democratic Writers' Association) organized various cultural programmes with music and poems in different parts of Kathmandu and many of them were arrested. Several theatre groups performed during the mass meetings organized by the Citizen's Movement for Democracy and Peace (see this chapter, sections 3.3 and 3.5) and CPN (Maoist) widely employs theatre and cultural performance for mobilization (Chapter four; Mottin 2010).

Finally, during a period of conflict, theatre artists engage with reality by portraying the crisis on the stage. Nepali theatre artists have produced different plays centred on the war between the Maoists and the state in the last years. *Khuma*,⁸⁷ directed by Anup Baral (2004), *Bari Lai La*⁸⁸ directed by Birendra Hamal (2005), *Mayadevika Sapana* (Dreams of Mayadevi) directed by Nisha and Sunil Pokharel (2006) are some examples. The war entered the Nepali stage at a late phase, only at the end of 2004. Actors in fact did not feel safe to engage with the conflict publicly. Anup Baral was the first to take such a decision. Despite not liking political theatre, he felt that the 'bitter times' his country was facing could not be ignored. *Khuma* ran for 15 days in Kathmandu. Threats reached the director from both sides: the Maoists did not like being portrayed as criminals whilst state representatives invited him to avoid staging similar issues in the future. However, the war has since become the dominant theme. It is present in different forms in several recent productions, especially in 2007, such as *Nyayapremi* (Nepali translation of 'Les Justes', by Camus) directed by Sunil Pokharel and *Talak Jung vs Tulke* (an adaptation from Lu Xun's 'True Story of AH-Q') directed by Anup Baral.

⁸⁷ *Khuma* is the name of the lead character, a Magar girl caught between the two conflicting sides. The play is an adaptation from a short story written by Mahendra Vikram Shah.

⁸⁸ 'Bari lai lai' is the sound that ends the refrain of a popular women Teej song. The play represents women's point of view on the suffering created by the war.

THEATRE LANGUAGE USED AS METAPHOR FOR LIFE/ POLITICAL LIFE	THEATRICALITY OF POLITICS: THE 'THEATRE STATE'	THEATRICALITY OF POLITICS: THEATRICAL/ PERFORMATIVE DEVICES USED BY DEMONSTRATORS DURING STREET PROTESTS, DIRECT ACTION ⁸⁹	POLITICAL STRUGGLE REPRESENTED/ ENACTED IN THE STREETS THROUGH THEATRE	POLITICAL STRUGGLE REPRESENTED ON STAGE THROUGH THEATRE
1	2	3	4	5

Table 3.1. From 'metaphor' to 'representation'. Although these different modes often overlap and co-exist they are presented here in a linear way for analytical purposes.

Theatre language as a metaphor for political struggle (no. 1) and theatrical performance as a stage representation of political struggle (no. 5) will not be analysed in this chapter. I will concentrate on the three middle components of the figure above.

2. Performing autocracy

Beloved countrymen, The Kingdom of Nepal was built on the foundations of the unification process initiated by King Prithvi Narayan Shah the Great. It is well known that to reign in accordance with the people's aspirations, our fore fathers initiated revolutionary measures of historic importance, ensuring a bright future of the nation and her people. History is witness to the fact that both the Nepalese people and the King have, in unison, played decisive roles in each and every period of the Kingdom's process of unification, democratization and modernization.

(from His Majesty King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev's proclamation to the nation, February 1st 2005)

Until May 2008, Nepal was the only Hindu kingdom in the world. However, the way in which religion and culture supported the Himalayan monarchy has changed remarkably over the centuries. In the past, various religious rituals, festivals and cultural practices such as Indra Jatra celebrated and legitimized the king's political power (Burghart 1987; Krauskopff and Lecomte-Tilouine 1996); but by the 1980s, the king had lost his religious and divine authority. Burghart (1987:269) comments that 'the ritual symbolism of the auspicious body of the king and the identity of king and realm still persist in native belief, but have lost their power to influence the believers. The pomp goes on, but there was a time when the pomp was also powerful'. According to Burghart, despite retaining a 'lordly' halo the ritual forms of political practice had lost their meaning and what emerged was 'the counterfeit reality' that I discussed in chapter two. Lakier however, remarks that while losing his ritual power, the king

⁸⁹ Cf. Boal 2006:16.

gained a 'nationalist stature that carried its own quasi-religious grandeur' (2005:149). In other words, it was not through religious rhetoric that the king legitimized his rule, but through nationalist rhetoric channelled via similar practices. The pomp was still effective. Ritual was transformed for new purposes (cf. Krauskopff and Lecompte-Tilouine 1996).

The objective of this section is twofold. First, I want to conceptualize the Nepalese Emergency of 2005 in terms of performance and to highlight the way in which the state built up a theatrical apparatus, the 'illusion' of its power. Second, I aim to show that to legitimize his power, the king resurrected the spirit and practices of the Panchayat period and used the same rhetoric (Borgstrom 1980; 1982). Any performance needs both a place and audience to watch the show in order to accomplish its purpose. So I will describe how ideological domination took spatial form (see Chapter two), how the king constructed the set to 'direct' the show of his power in Kathmandu, and how, by creating a special physical space through rallies, billboards, public processions and ceremonies, he rhetorically echoed powerful tropes of the Panchayat time such as the ideas of national and social unity, and public order. Even state occasions were co-opted in favour of the monarchy. Controlling both the public space and people's imagination seemed to be one of the king's priorities. In fact, success in governing (as well as in fields such as development) depends on the control of interpretations (Mosse 2005). Although the king tried to establish his power through performance, he was eventually failed by it.

2.1. Silenced

Nepal was informed of the king's take over of the state power through an address to the nation aired on TV and radio on 1st February 2005, and printed in the newspapers the following day. By removing the rights to freedom of information, movement and gathering the royal regime precluded the possibility of dissent. The king created a *tabula rasa*, a clear space upon which to show and exercise absolute rule. His version of reality excluded all other versions (Lukes 2005:7). In fact, the 1990 Constitution guaranteed freedom of expression to Nepali media which since then had grown massively (Onta 2002; Hutt 2006). The space opened for public debate by the advent of democracy in 1990, however biased by exclusions, neglect and centralization (Lawoti 2005; 2007), was then totally closed. No demonstration of dissent was allowed in the streets. Although some theatre groups managed to perform indoor, street performances were banned (see next section). The citizens had no choice but to become spectators of the king's 'shows'.

From 1st February 2005, censorship was overt.⁹⁰ For the first time in the 50 years the Army entered television and newspaper headquarters and stayed for a week to monitor and censor the news from the editorial offices (www.nepalpressfreedom.org). By physically occupying the space, the security forces controlled the nation's access to information. A government edict, printed in the state-run newspaper *Gorkhapatra* on February 4th 2005, stated that any form of media publishing reports which criticized 'the spirit of the royal proclamation' would be condemned.⁹¹ As a result, the publications of the first weeks after February 1st merely reflected the royal government's views through careful selection of both news and photographs. For example, when the Maoists declared a *bandh* in Kathmandu during the days after the royal coup, *The Kathmandu Post* published a big photo of a traffic jam on the front page of the February 4th edition to testify that the capital was not adhering to the *bandh* but was supporting the king's decision. However, rumour spread that government officers had been obliged to go to work and that micro-bus drivers were suffering from conflicting obligations. On the one hand, the government pushed them to defy the *bandh*, on the other the Maoists threatened them not to.

In a Ministry of Information and Communication (MOIC) notice following the February 1st directives, the royal government announced that all radio stations were obliged to broadcast only 'purely entertainment programmes' and not 'any news, information, write-ups, opinions and expressions'.⁹² It also warned of penalties against the violators of the notice (www.fnjnepal.org). The line beyond which items were considered news and current affairs programming became blurred and very subjective. The security forces were sensitive even about the kind of music that was broadcast. Nepali folk songs on social issues were generally banned, on the grounds that 'patriotic' songs would raise the Maoist morale (*Nepali Times* #238). A journalist reported that his station used to play Nepali and foreign (Hindi) songs in an approximately 80:20 ratio. After the restrictions, the proportion changed in favour of foreign, mainly Hindi, music (INSN Media Update March 23rd, 2005). Responsibility for distinguishing what was 'news' and what was 'entertainment' was manipulated and used in instrumental ways. One broadcaster complained that he was not allowed to talk, 'even if it was on ways to grow cauliflowers or getting rid of pests in the field' (*Nepali Times* *ibid*). An example of the

⁹⁰ Hutt (2006) has explained in depth that since 2001 the press was under strong pressure. First, independent journalists were prevented from reporting about the royal massacre because of a barrier of silence imposed by the palace and also the dangers involved, the power of the 'things that should not be said'. Second, the relationship between the Maoists, the Royal Nepalese Army and the Press was rather complex. The situation degenerated with the nine months of Emergency started in November 2001, forcing journalists into self-censorship.

⁹¹ See Hutt (2006) for similar directions promulgated in the Emergency 2001.

⁹² The validity of the notice was supposed to be for 6 months, even though Emergency laws might have been lifted earlier. Emergencies in fact have to be renewed by the House of Representatives every 3 months. The Emergency declared on February 1st was actually lifted on April 29th 2005, but the struggle between the media and the royal government remained heated even in the months that followed.

defence of official narratives and the negation of events is worth mentioning. In July 2005, the Information Minister told BBC that FM stations all over the world only broadcast music, not news (Nepali Times #258).

But King Gyanendra's speeches to the nation are probably the most striking examples of one-way, top-down communication. The king strongly adhered to his 'version' of reality in which he had absolute power and control of his country up to the very climax of the People's Movement in April 2006. In the speech to the nation delivered on February 1st 2006, the king justified his action despite the previous month's heavy street contestations, and held administrative elections ignoring the opposition carried out by the main political parties. In the middle of general strikes and street repression, on April 14th 2006, king Gyanendra talked to the nation. It was the beginning of Nepali New Year. He called on all political parties to enter a dialogue so that multi-party democracy could be initiated. He didn't mention the strong opposition he was facing or people's demands. Pressed by the international community and in danger of losing his throne, the king delivered another speech on April 21st. While returning 'executive power' to the people and asking SPA (Seven Party Alliance) to name a prime minister, he once again ignored the core reasons of the protest, as well as the demonstrations themselves.

In was only in the last speech, on April 24th, that King Gyanendra restored the Parliament that he had sacked in 2002. He publicly expressed his condolences 'to those who lost their lives in the people's movement'. For the first time the king acknowledged the existence of an opposition to his government. By doing so, he released part of his 'royal power' as he had to listen, and then admit the lack of unity within the body politic. This point is particularly important. According to the Hindu conception of an organic universe, the king is ritually at the highest rank in the terrestrial realm (Burghart 1987). As the mind, he governs and takes care of the rest of the body's organs (Ibid.). As Burghart points out, in hierarchical societies equality is not given, 'only the mind is invested with intentionality, and hence with desires, purpose, and authoritative speech' (1996: 304). The king exercised his power by ignoring 'unwanted' bits of reality (Lukes 2005). By listening, the king had to acknowledge the people's agency in dissenting, and that their desires and intentionality differed from his. The meaning of the Emergency 2005 may be taken beyond the practical and obvious readings. By silencing a whole country through censorship and the curtailment of liberties, the king removed the possibility of agency beyond his own, and reinstated the hierarchical principles that governed the body politic of the Panchayat system where he was the all-encompassing divine lord. Power was exercised by ignoring selected bits of reality.

2.2. The Shah 'theatre state'

Having cleared the space of any possible expression of dissent, the royal government set off to construct and disseminate a narrative centred on the role of king, on his benevolence and on his historical affection for his country. Soon after February 1st, rhythmical slogans echoed on the hill of Gurukul. People walking towards Maiti Devi Chowk chanted *Hamro Raja Hamro Desh*, 'our king, our country'. An artist explained that these were old slogans from the Panchayat period. Despite the ban on public gatherings, during the days immediately after the declaration of Emergency, small carousels of people holding Nepali flags and singing pro-monarchy slogans could be seen walking around Kathmandu to 'show' that the king, backed by his people, was in control of the situation. The process of 'creating' state power had started. Participating in processions, travelling around the country, taking part in parties or public ceremonies are ways through which the king, 'like some wolf or tiger spread[ing] his scent through his territories, as almost physically part of them' (Geertz, 1985:158). The organic simile works well in the case of the Nepali kingship based on the conception of the nation state in Hindu terms (Burghart 1987).

It was usual practice for both royalist and other parties in Nepal to go to the villages around Kathmandu Valley and 'collect' people, transport them to the capital to support demonstrations. Sometimes they received a few rupees in exchange, sometimes only tea and biscuits. Propaganda and counter-propaganda struggles have a long history in Nepal. Nikhsy Shamsheer Rana, assistant to the Minister of Information and Communication Shri Shumsher Rana, was well known for organizing small rallies during multiparty democracy, advocating for the king to take over the state (nepalnews 12 May 2006). For example, in January 1990, as soon as NC (Nepali Congress) started to call people to join a movement against the Panchayat system that would have started on February 18th (Hachhethu 1990:178), HMG organized a counter-propaganda war, arranging *pancha* rallies in different parts of the country (Ibid.). The multi-party system was defamed as an 'alien' idea, and popular demonstrations were labelled 'as anti-social, anti-national, anti-constitutional and destructive/subversive/hooliganism' (Ibid.).

During Emergency 2005, any public ceremony involving the king was greeted with demonstrations of approval. If public ceremonies are part of the rituals and choreographies that normally sustain the 'theatre state', these performances became even more significant in a moment when public consent was shaky. Schechner (1993:84) describes a similar occasion when marchers and spectators were recruited in Moscow Red Square to mark the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. That performance had two main targets, the mass media and authority itself. 'The

arrogance of the leaders looking down from reviewing stands is matched only by their insecurity (both actual and imagined). They needed reassurance of their own popularity and invincibility' (Ibid. 84). As throughout Emergency the king was controlling both the physical space in the streets and the ideological space of the media, from his perspective the success of those performances was guaranteed.

In a notice dated 10 March MOIC (Ministry of Information and Communication) obliged all independent journalists to broadcast pre-canned Public Service Announcements (PSAs). A CD containing the PSAs was sent to the FM stations. The government invoked a clause in the National Broadcast Regulations to get the stations to air the PSAs (INSN Media Update March 11, 2005). The broadcasters were supposed to air these programmes preceded by a message about the sender. The skits can be classified as 'grey propaganda' as the source of information could be correctly identified but the accuracy was uncertain (Jowett and O'Donnell 2006:20). In fact, some radio stations questioned the PSAs on the basis that they also were information programmes and thus banned by the royal proclamation. Yet, through the skits the royal government deliberately aimed at controlling the interpretation of the situation, of constructing and disseminating an 'alternative version of reality' to legitimize their actions, build credibility with the audience, and weaken the adversaries. Here is the translation of three out of the five PSAs that the government ordered Kathmandu radio stations to broadcast.

MOTHER: "Yeh Kalu. Kalu."

SON: "Why Mother?"

MOTHER: "They used to say that Hire of Dandaghar had been lured and taken by the Maoists along with our son. I see him at home these days."

SON: "Yes mother (that's true). Hire has changed. Our brother still seems unaware (of the offer). The government gives general amnesty to those that come to surrender and teach them different skills to enable them to stand on their own feet."

MOTHER: "Is that so?"

SON: "Hire dai is now said to have become an expert electrician."

MOTHER: "Hare Shiva, Shiva (Dear God). I don't know if my son is dead or alive. I may die without seeing his face."

MUSIC

ANNOUNCEMENT: You are also encouraged to surrender to security forces or administration like Hire. Bring happiness on the face of your mother and motherland Nepal and also improve your future.

COMRADE: "Jiwan, our friends are surrendering one after another."

JIWAN: "Yes, only yesterday Comrade Bwanso, who used to say what is the use living after murdering our brothers and torturing them everyday, has gone to the security forces and surrendered."

COMRADE: "Sooner or later we also need to take that road. Understand."

JIWAN: "Yes Comrade. Living after killing each other, murdering the innocent and unarmed is cowardice, and a crime that is unforgivable. Understand. How did we lose our senses and engage in the deplorable acts?"

COMRADE: It is no use feeling sorry or repenting now, let us regret (our acts) and instead of killing, we must jointly make this country a zone of peace again. We must encourage others that went along (with them) [followed] by convincing them to become good citizens.

JIWAN: You are right. Let us surrender today and also encourage others to surrender.

WOMAN'S VOICE: "Kamal, they said there is a meeting on the next Chautara (resting place) this evening. Accompany me, OK. They have called us to attend."

KAMAL: "Now look, do people attend meetings in the evening?"

WOMAN: "What will happen? We'll only go there listen to speeches and come back"

KAMAL: "No! You cannot go to meetings organized by terrorists with arms and without authorization, because the security forces can carry out effective attacks at (such meetings) any moment. At those times the terrorist leaders leave the general public to fend for themselves or escape after using us as shields. Therefore, let us fulfil the role of good citizens by not attending meetings by the terrorists."

What immediately emerges from the PSA is a clear-cut moral landscape populated by black-and-white, cardboard characters. The government and the 'good citizen' stand on the positive pole opposed to the Maoist insurgents who are portrayed as terrorists on a declining path.

The moral is upheld by the narrating voice that closes PSA #1, by the fearful and guilty comrade in PSA #2 and by Kamal in PSA #3. They all incite the listeners to fulfil specific 'roles', those of the 'good citizen', 'good guardian' and 'responsible citizen'. The behavioural scripts associated with these roles convey, unidirectionally, the desired objectives of the royal government: surrender to the security forces, encourage other people to do the same, and do not attend meetings organized by 'terrorists'. The government fulfils the role of the 'good guardian', who directs and takes care of the hierarchically lower and naive people. The 'good citizen' can only play a passive role, be a follower and an executer of orders. The security forces are portrayed in an extremely positive way, as they 'carry out effective attacks at any moment'. The choice of words renders the dialogue artificial.

Hire, who followed the rebels, is described as a 'passive victim', 'lured' by them, without agency. The government is given the role of the forgiving and benevolent 'mother' who not only gives a general amnesty but, in terms that recall the discourse of development, also 'teach them different skills', and 'enable them to stand on their own feet'. The Maoist rebels are described as 'terrorists' (PSA #3) who break the law by organizing meetings at night with arms and without authorization, an obvious practice for a guerrilla group. The Maoist leaders are described as selfish men of no scruples who escape after using people as shields. Again, the reiteration of common knowledge and twisted judgementalism render the dialogues recognizably fake.

The narrator of the PSA #1 emotionally blackmails the listeners through a common *topos*, that of the mother dying without seeing her son. By surrendering, not only would the listeners make their natural mother happy, but also 'mother Nepal'. Nationalism and family values – so popular in folk songs and stories – become anchors for the government's message and are used to motivate the audience to accept its purpose through images that recall those employed in the Panchayat years. Resonance is widely used both in propaganda and persuasion communication because it facilitates the message delivery. The recipients are assumed not to perceive the themes as imposed on them by an external authority, but rather as coming from within themselves (Jowett and O'Donnell 2006: 37). The comrade in PSA #2 uses a phrase that resonates with many Nepali as it brings to mind the

Panchayat rhetoric (Cf. Borgstrom 1980). The statement 'we must jointly make this country a zone of peace again' may, however, trigger off contrasting feelings.

The royal government also made use of 'props' to create a benign monarchical environment (see fig. 5). The main junctions of Kathmandu were decorated with huge metal billboards⁹³ publicly declaring the king's commitment towards the welfare of his country. In some places they were the only decorations at the junctions, in others they mingled with commercial advertisements, a pop art autocracy. They were signed by 'H.M.G. [His Majesty Government] Department of Information and reported quotations from members of the royal family or national poets as if to find in history the legitimization for these words and to link King Gyanendra to his dynasty.

The king revealed the different shades of his 'lordship'. For example, his role of benevolent monarch, the 'all providing universal man' (Burghart 1987:242-43) who fulfils his sacred duty of providing for the welfare of his subjects, is expressed in the following billboards:

WE HAVE NO INTEREST OTHER THAN RESTORATION OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND THE EXERCISE OF MEANINGFUL DEMOCRACY

(opposite the West entrance to the Royal Palace along Kantipath, in English)

IF VIOLENCE IS BEING DONE AGAINST THE COUNTRY AND THE CITIZENS, THE CITIZENS WILL NOT TOLERATE IT AND THE RULES WILL NOT ALLOW IT

(Ratna Park Junction, towards Bag Bazar, in Nepali)

In the second slogan the king claims not only his monopoly in the use of force, but also the state 'monopoly on public service' (Burghart, 1996:303; 1993:8). Other billboards denounced selfishness and corruption:

TO FULFIL THE PERSONAL OR PARTY SELFISHNESS IS NOT ONLY A CRIME BUT ALSO A GREAT SIN

(Exhibition Road Junction, in Nepali)

A PERSON IS INTELLIGENT IF HE IDENTIFIES THE MISTAKES DONE BY HIMSELF AND ALSO ADDRESSES THEM

(Exhibition Road, in Nepali)

⁹³ I have photographed about 90 billboards only in the central area of Kathmandu, but there were more that I did not manage to record. According to a website UWB (accessed on May 27, 2006) in May 2005 the Department of Information had 149 hoarding boards hung in the capital, which cost the state 1,5 million rupees; 50 were demolished during protests.

This last moral invective may have referred to the Maoist rebels or the political parties or the citizens supporting each of these groups, but could as well paradoxically refer to king himself. The former, against 'personal or party selfishness' clearly aimed at reinstating the king as the paladin of the public good. During the Panchayat time the public domain was represented by the king and his will was to represent the common good of the indivisible body politic (Burghart 1996:303). The political parties were identified with the private sphere and characterized by the self-interest of the leaders or the collective self-interest of their followers (Ibid.). The privileged connection between the Shah family and Nepali people, used also as a justification for the Emergency, reappears:

NEPALI KING'S CROWN IS FOR THE CITIZENS, NEPALI CITIZENS ARE FOR THE KING'S CROWN, THE KING AND THE CITIZENS ARE BOTH FOR NEPAL AND NEPALI
(Thamel Junction, in Nepali)

UNITY, HONESTY AND COUNTRY DEVELOPMENT IS AND SHOULD BE OUR ONLY TARGET
(Thamel Chowk, in Nepali)

THE RELIGIOUS OBLIGATION/DHARMA FOR ALL IS TO WIPE THE TEARS OF THE PEOPLE BY THE PEOPLE. THOSE PEOPLE WHO HELP THE PEOPLE WILL REACH HEAVEN
(Exhibition Road, in English)

NEPALIS SHOULD BE READY TO SACRIFICE WHATEVER THEY HAVE FOR THEIR OWN SOIL AND THEIR OWN CROWN
(Exhibition Road, in English)

Another relic of the Panchayat time, 'development', emerges as a priority in the king's agenda. Most of these banners were in Nepali language. A few, along tourist routes (Thamel Junction, near the Royal Palace and in New Baneshwor Junction, near Birendra International Conference Hall), were written in English and dealt with the monarchy's dedication to peace, multiparty democracy and human rights:

ALL THE ORGANS OF THE STATE MUST REMAIN ALERT IN HONOURING AND UPHOLDING HUMAN RIGHTS
(In front of the main entrance to the Royal Palace in Durbar Margh, in English).

The billboards seemed to be a display of power for the sake of power itself and probably had the function of publicly reassuring the king and justifying the role of the monarchy. Many of the people I talked to did not give much importance to the messages and were surprised about my interest. In some places the royal banners hung alone. Placed among other commercial ads, others were perfectly integrated in the urban landscape. The difference in tone between the billboards in Nepali and those in English suggest that they were addressed to two different audiences.

State occasions such as Democracy Day on 18 February 2005 or Unity Day celebrated on 17 January 2006 were manipulated by the royal government to publicly link the interests of the king to those of the country and its citizens. Similarly, the birthdays of the royal family were publicly celebrated through an ample display of banners, billboards and images.⁹⁴ For example, for Prince Paras' birthday, in December 2005, dancers from different ethnic groups, wearing traditional costumes opened the celebratory parade heading towards Durbar Marg. At the back, a billboard with the image of the prince was carried on a wagon. It was placed at the end of Durbar Marg, blessed with flower garlands and a lamp. Paradoxically, the small posters which hung around the *chok* as if on a clothes line reminded me of the ads that adorn many tiny bazaar shops in the outskirts of the capital. The amalgam of political power and religious symbolism conveyed through a traditional and commercial-like manner created an uncomfortable modernity. However, the parade took place in almost empty roads. The traffic was blocked and indifferent passers-by would stop for a few minutes, and then walk away.

Private businesspeople and religious institutions publicly displayed their loyalty to the royal family. Birthday posters showing wishes for the prince were pasted all over the city, on walls lining the roads, on light poles, on construction sites, and over the posters of the Nepali hit film of the moment, *Timi Meri Hau* (You are mine). One of them read (see fig. 4)

On the eve of His Royal Highness Crown Prince Paras Bikram Bir Shah Dev's auspicious birthday, the holy establishment of Tirupati Balaji Temple in Nepal Prays for the glory of the Royal Family of Nepal, the welfare of the Nepalese society, eternal peace, good governance, Constitutional Monarchy and multiparty democracy

The English translation and the capital letters come from the poster. While 'constitutional monarchy' is capitalized, 'multiparty democracy' is not, probably suggesting the writer's preference between the two..

⁹⁴ Royal birthdays were important for the legitimization of power. In 1987 party members elected in the local elections were removed from their place by the Government because of their refusal to participate in public processions on the king's birthday (Burghart 1996:306; see Chapter two)



Fig. 4. Pamphlets celebrating the prince birthday are stuck over commercial movie posters.

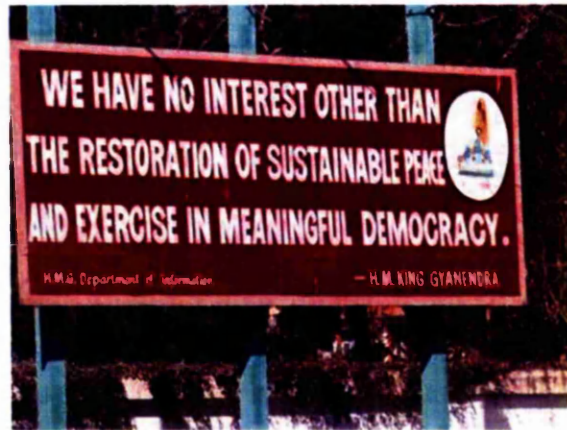


Fig. 5. One of the king's hoardings.



Fig. 6. Bag Bazar during a day of *bandh*, December 2004.

Thamel Tourism Development Board took advantage of the situation and placed the birthday wishes for the prince and New Year wishes in the same plastic gate -sponsored by Pepsi - placed at the entrance of the tourist area reading:

We extend our best wishes for Long Life of our beloved Crown Prince on the occasion of his Royal Highness 35th Birth Day' and 'May peace prevail from the beginning of the Happy New Year 2006' [in English and Nepali].

The discourse the king's government conveyed was that the monarchy was the benevolent and the god-like protector of all the people of Nepal.⁹⁵ What could be seen was a superficial public display, in fact there seemed to be no real support for the monarchy.

January 11 marks the birthday of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king who is regarded as the founding father of modern Nepal and ancestor of the Shah dynasty. It used to be celebrated as Unity Day.⁹⁶ In January 2006, the weeklong celebrations culminated in a cultural programme at what was the Royal Nepal Academy. The rhetoric of the national state was fully at work. A big picture – about 3x2 metres – of a triumphant Prithvi Narayan honoured with a *mala* of colourful flowers was standing on the right side of the stage. Nearby, the photos of King Gyanendra and his wife, were similarly worshipped with flowers and a camphor flame. Representatives of the government and the chair of the Academy opened the programme which presented the classical drama *Kiratarjuniya*, written by Vatsraj Amatya and directed by Shakuntala Sharma, as well as 'national' songs performed by senior artists. The drama was introduced in the leaflet as a story evoking feelings of good governance, union and protection through religion. The event culminated at the end with an actor impersonating the king entering the stage among swirling dancers. After reaching the front of the stage, the king delivered a speech. In the background men and women dressed with traditional ethnic costumes climbed the platform, waving Nepali flags. The scene ended in a still picture of national diversity, unity and glory.⁹⁷ The government cancelled Unity Day in 2007, in the same way as it had cancelled the public celebration of royal birthdays in the previous months: 'the Home Ministry issued a notice asking all government offices and diplomatic missions of Nepal in foreign countries, corporations and educational institutions to continue their daily works. No public functions were organised in the capital to mark the National Unity Day, except for a small crowd that gathered around the statue of the Late

⁹⁵ Praises were published on newspapers even on the days following Prachanda's election as PM in full. It would be interesting to see if the businessmen who sponsored them were the same who sponsored the wishes on the royals' birthdays.

⁹⁶ Pritvi Narayan Shah 'unified' Nepal and is praised by nationalist rhetoric as the first ruler who acknowledged the idea of unity within cultural diversity. This interpretation is rejected by Gellner (1997:24) as well as other commentators (Khatry 2007).

⁹⁷ It is interesting to notice similar aesthetics at work in some Maoist programs with totally different content but also aiming at recreating a living picture, a colourful 'tranche-de-vie' on the stage.

King Prithvi Narayan at Singha Durbar to pay homage on the occasion', [...] 'A group of demonstrators had even damaged the statue of Prithvi Narayan located in front of Singha Durbar. It remained veiled with a red cloth for around eight months. Just a few days ago, it was uncovered – which showed that the crown and sword of the statue was missing'.⁹⁸ The representation of Nepal's unity performed at the Academy in 2006 had already disappeared. The country was going through a reassessment of past symbols. References to the royal past were gradually being removed from the institutions and their productions. Even the performative illusion of national unity within diversity thus had a short life.

Silencing the nation was part of the king's role as lord. The rest of his role was conveyed through slogans, rallies, billboards, ceremonies and tours. The messages aimed at fully restoring the Hindu lordship through a nationalist rhetoric that recalled Panchayat. However, was the pomp enough to bring back the power? Burghart suggested this disjuncture between form and content was already evident in the 1980s. And in fact, in 2005 opposition grew very quickly, first in the private space, and then in the public, as we shall see in the next sections.

3. Street programmes for democracy and peace

If repression prevented an open challenge to the royal regime, a huge amount of information was circulating underground through non-official and non-traditional channels. In the months after February 1st, blogs linked with providers outside Nepal spread widely. Some websites were blocked, discussion forums were closed and emails were said to be under surveillance. Yet, although in July 2005 27 websites were banned in Nepal, most of them continued to upload news received via e-mail from activists in loco through proxy web services.⁹⁹ The cyberspace – in the private realm – emerged as an alternative 'public space' to counter the ban on both the physical and the symbolic space.

Similarly, a looser form of censorship marked the boundary between what could be 'read' or 'watched', and what could not. An example from my personal experience may be useful to shed light on how personal trust could allow for the trespassing of these boundaries. Manjushree Thapa's

⁹⁸ See <http://www.nepalnews.com/archive/2007/jan/jan11/news09.php> visited on February 15th, 2007.

⁹⁹ As well as Maoist websites, both insn.org (a website ran by Nepali and international activists aiming to develop dialogue on human rights and democratic peace) and samudaya.org (a website run by Nepali diaspora in US initially focusing on art and literature) were blocked in Nepal by an order from the Ministry of Communication and Information of Gyanendra's government on the grounds that they encouraged Maoist activities in Nepal. Both sites, however, did not advocate for either of the parties. [Nepalipost.com](http://nepalipost.com), run by independent journalists was blocked before that date. A Media Monitoring Group point out that despite wide censorship a blog run by high caste Kathmandu-based elite – [unitedweblog](http://unitedweblog.com) – was never blocked. Several proxy web services were also banned.

Forget Kathmandu. An elegy for Democracy (2005), a book about recent Nepali history quite popular in Nepal before the Emergency, was 'banned' after the king's coup. A few weeks later, I was glancing through books about Nepal in a big bookstore. The bookseller knew me. Before paying, he wanted to show me something and proudly picked up *Forget Kathmandu*. It was hidden in a newspaper wrapping under a huge pile of books. The same day I told another foreigner who was looking for the same book where to find it. When he went to the bookshop, the seller told him he did not have any copies.

During the summer of 2005, a civil society group including journalists, academics, lawyers, writers and other professionals, unified as the Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP), started to organize public meetings in different areas of the capital¹⁰⁰ to resist state repression and to demand the restoration of democracy and peace in the country (Gautam 2007; Dahal 2001; Bhatta 2007). They organized collective forms of public resistance and defiance of the royal proclamation started in August 2005. In a public meeting held in Naya Baneshwor, leaders of the major political parties were invited as guests to listen to their requests. The major discourse focused on the need to 'complete' the 1990 constitution in order to avoid any possibility of the palace seizing power undemocratically. Inviting political party leaders as auditors implied the existence of different views between political parties and civil society. Because of the 'conditions of listening' (Burghart 1994), politicians, as 'smaller lords', were usually able to exercise 'non-listening' as a strategy to assert their superiority. Within this context, however, the typical hierarchy was reversed, as CMDP representatives were determined to be heard. CMDP leaders spoke after symbolically silencing the political authorities, who had, in fact, been silenced for real by the king. For the first time after the 1st February, the speakers on the stage and people in the audience did not openly talk of *prajatantra* (democracy linked to the king), but of *loktantra* (people's democracy) and of *ganatantra* (republic). This meeting marked the beginning of the organization of political cultural programmes where CMDP's speeches were alternated by talks, poems, dramas, performances and songs. The format was a popular and familiar one (Mottin 2010). Reminiscences of the people's movement in 1990 were brought back through singing the same songs. Ramesh (see Chapter two), the people's singer, sang his people's songs that invited everybody to come into the streets and protest for freedom. A new environment was being created, new moral spaces (see Chapter one) made of sounds, symbols and slogans that were starting to challenge the government's domination and to link past memories with present hopes of struggle.

Rise, rise from the village
*Rise, rise from the land*¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ The group organized lots of similar meetings also in all the districts of the country.

¹⁰¹ The literal translation of the Nepali word *basti* is 'slum', not 'land' as reported in the translation cited.

*To change the face of our country
Let's rise, rise*

*If you have a pen in hand
Take your pen and rise up
If you play songs and music
Take your flute and rise up
Rise, rise from the village*

*Those who work with tools
Take your tools and rise up
Those who have none of these
Use your voice and rise up
Rise, rise from the village¹⁰²*

Gaun gaun bata utha (Rise, rise from the village) sang by Raamesh and Rayan became one of the symbols and the musical icons of the popular movement for democracy in the months that followed. Ramesh and Rayan are among the founding members of the 1970s Ralpa movement, which I mentioned in the context of politico-cultural forms of struggle against the Panchayat rule (see Chapter one). The king's pomp and his attempt to resurrect the Panchayat spirit, was countered by performing old songs of resistance during CDMP political mass meetings. The songs brought back the spirit of the past struggle against the Panchayat, enriched by the complexities of present-day Nepal. The resurrection of those songs invoked the pleasure of familiarity but also anger, because little had changed. As Diamond (1996) suggests, performance can bridge and merge the past and the present, memory and consciousness. These cultural performances provided flashes of the past, which were interpreted personally according to spectators' individual histories. Diamond (Ibid. 3) highlights the 're' discourse present in performance: *reembody*, *reinscribe*, *reconfigure*, *resignify*. While acknowledging the pre-existing discourse and the pleasure of repetition, possibilities are available for the new to materialize (Ibid.), in a multiplicity of visions. Well before August, resistance to autocracy in 2005 had linked to its historical roots. In early May 2005, in fact, Gurukul invited Ramesh to perform, his first public appearance after many years. Both concerts attracted a full house and ran smoothly, despite the recent end of Emergency rules and the songs' revolutionary content. Most of the people in the audience knew the lyrics by heart and danced in excitement at the most popular and energetic songs.

Instead of re-evocation, a process of appropriation, reworking and transformation of traditional cultural performances was at work during the Deusi-Bhailo programme performed by Sisinupaani Parivar and led by the poet Arjun Parajuli in Gurukul during Tihar 2005. The Deusi Bhailo song practice is said to have started hundreds of years ago by the legendary Bali Maharaj. While

¹⁰² The translation of *Gaun gaun bata utha* (Rise, rise from the village) is taken from the CD leaflet *Au Milaun Hamra Hath haru* (Come let us shake hand), People's Songs of Nepal vol.1, Brikuti Academic Publications, Kathmandu.

bhailo is sung by women during Lakshmi Puja (Gai Tihar or Diwali), *deusi* is sung by men on Goru tihar (day after Diwali) and Bhai tika (Anuradha Sharma, The Telegraph – Calcutta, November 12, 2007). Singing carols during Tihar, especially during the third day of Laxmi Puja, is a well-established practice. Gathering according to interest or ethnic group, or for particular charity purposes, people travel by foot or bus around the city. Going from house to house, mainly to friends' places, they sing, play *madal* and dance. In exchange for their blessing and entertainment, they get food, *mithai* (sweets), *roti* (bread), fruit, and money. While creativity may run free, some songs are typical and recurrent, like *Deusire*. The lyrics below are an example of a standard version. The lead singer starts the song. The chorus reply after each line:

LEAD SINGER	CHORUS
<i>Bhana Mera Bhai ho</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Say it my brothers	- <i>Deusire</i>
<i>Sormelai Gana</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Say it in tune	- <i>Deusire</i>
<i>Rato Bato</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Red trail	- <i>Deusire</i>
<i>Chiplo Bato</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Slippery trail	- <i>Deusire</i>
<i>Laddai Paddai</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Slipping and Sliding	- <i>Deusire</i>
<i>Akeya Hami</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Finally we made it home!	- <i>Deusire</i>
 <i>Yo Gharma Laxmi</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
In this home Lord Laxmi	- <i>Deusire</i>
<i>Sadhai Aun</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Always come	- <i>Deusire</i>
<i>Hamilai Dinus</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Give us [money or food]	- <i>Deusire</i>
<i>Bidha Garnus</i>	- <i>Deusire</i>
Say good bye to us	- <i>Deusire</i>

The Deusi-Bhailo programme in Gurukul started with groups of children singing traditional songs and performing folk dances. It moved towards political critique only when the Sisnupani Parivar entered. Some Gurukul actors placed themselves at the back of the choir, so as to not to miss the opportunity to sing. Performed in the Gurukul yard in the late afternoon, the atmosphere was festive and cheerful. Before the beginning of the singing, a *dya* was lit near some offers of food and flowers. The audience sat on carpets and chairs in front of the artists. The name 'Gurukul', flashing in big blue neon tube lights, gave a surreal and post-modern touch to an otherwise extremely intimate and familiar environment. Arjun Parajuli took the traditional song and re-inscribed it with contemporary issues. Using metaphors the audience was familiar with, the contemporary lyrics were bitter yet hilarious. Below are the opening lines from a performance that lasted more than an hour, a poignant

poetic rendition of a complex political and social situation. Once again, the lead singer introduces the line and the chorus reply:

LEAD SINGER	CHORUS
<i>Bhana mera bhai</i>	- <i>loktantra</i> (choir)
Say it, brothers!	- democracy
<i>Bhana mera bahini</i>	- <i>loktantra</i>
Say it, sisters!	- democracy
<i>Jode bhana</i>	- <i>loktantra</i>
Speak loud	- democracy
<i>Bandukle sunun</i>	- <i>loktantra</i>
May the guns listen	- democracy
<i>Golile sunun</i>	- <i>loktantra</i>
May the bullets listen	- democracy
<i>Goli haanne</i>	- <i>loktantra</i>
To shoot	- democracy
<i>Tolile¹⁰³ sunun</i>	- <i>loktantra</i>
May the groups listen	- democracy

Hami tyassai aenaun sisnupanile ahrayo
 We have not just come here casually, Sisnupani ordered us¹⁰⁴
Deusi aja, hijai rati topi harayo
 Today [we sing] Deusi, yesterday night the cap was stolen/lost

Hijo madhyeratama sarkar savaar bhaechha
 Yesterday at midnight the king came
Kinabhandha hamro topi lutna rahechha
 Why? To steal our caps!

Daura surwal lutnalai bholi rati aune re
 People say he will come tomorrow night to steal our daura suruaal
Sabai daura surual sarkar eklai laune re
 People say that only the king will wear daura suruaal

Jaska luga jati chhan laau ajei kapera
 All the dresses you may have, wear them all today
Bholidekhi hiDnuparchha hatle chhopera
 From tomorrow you will have to walk covering yourself with your hands

Pohor pohor hamile Deusi gungunayaun
 Last year we sang Deusi
Ahile Deusi khelenau samchaar sunayaun
 This time we did not play Deusi, we read out the news [instead]

Given the political moment, the text is intriguing. Although the Emergency had formally ended in April, in November 2005, the king's cabinet was still ruling. The People's War was going on. In the adapted version, the song calls for brothers and sisters to sing loud so that the 'gun' and 'bullet', as metaphors for the revolutionaries in the jungle, may hear their call and fire. The traditional refrain

¹⁰³ The word *toli* is used to indicate a group of students, a batch, a sport team or a group of soldiers, and a political team.

¹⁰⁴ The original line is *hami tesai aayenau, bali raja le pathako*, which means 'we have been ordered by the king to come here', but being a pro-democracy group, they didn't mention the king and said the group's name instead.

'deusire', is replaced with the word 'democracy', chanted as if a magical invocation. The second part, instead, depicts the citizens stripped naked by the king.

The revival of people's songs brought the past into the present, and brought the village environment into the city. Yet, the experience of the performers for both artists and spectators was permeated with new contemporary overtones. Similarly, in the Deusi song, past traditions, associated with the monarchy, with religion, with the memories of childhood and families were the basis upon which 'the news' was transferred, mixing different kinds of feelings and emotions. The audience expressed their involvement by clapping rhythmically, and laughing about the innuendos. Some men took centre stage and engaged in spontaneous dances.

The performance triggered a chain effect. The day after the programme Aarohan artists organized a Deusi tour around friends' houses in Kathmandu. Travelling in a rented bus, we sang political songs mixed with traditional songs, similar to those of the Sisnupani Parivar. Therefore, the programme attracted a following and spread beyond Gurukul. The public space was banned. But from a private position, through the transformation allowed by the aesthetic space, artists recreated a temporary public space of agency, in the manner outlined by Arendt (see Chapter two). And these spaces multiplied themselves.

4. The performance of dissent

Only in April 2006, when opposition became widespread and turned into a popular mass movement, was dissent expressed in more colourful and performative ways. Slogans, symbols and 'props' used in street rallies became more explicit both in the capital and in the rural areas. Working tools, sticks, torches, green branches, conch shells, puppets, flames, photos transformed the street into a vibrant and radical stage. The SPA (Seven Party Alliance) organized general strikes and the CMDP (Citizen Movement for Democracy and Peace) planned public mass meetings. The king's state answered with a new wave of arrests – of politicians, civil society leaders, activists – and curfews. However, the agendas of CMDP and SPA were getting closer. Protests were often carried out by professional groups organizing in separate venues, as if society wanted to display itself in an ordered way. When security forces repressed dissenters during the April demonstrations, every day a new category was targeted: lawyers, doctors, teachers, journalists, and artists. However, the last days of the People's movement seemed to be characterized by a unity that was noticed by enthusiastic commentators:

The up swelling of street power has given the citizens of Nepal—totalling 26 million and not at all a small country—a newfound unity and national self-confidence. For a people that has been historically divided by ethnicity, caste, faith and geography, the entire population came together to fight for pluralism. This has provided the energy for reinstating a Parliament disbanded four years ago and emplacing an interim government that, having sidelined Gyanendra, is now all set to bring the Maoists in from the cold and re-engage in the task of nation-building' (Kanak Mani Dixit, THOnline, accessed on May 8th, 2006).

A *communitas* was being created. *Communitas*, as Turner suggested, describes those moments in which the audience or the participants of a theatrical event or a ritual feel themselves as part of the whole in an organic, and almost spiritual way (Turner 1982; Dolan 2005:11). The spectators' individuality dissolves as they become attuned to those around them. The audience is submerged in a cohesive, fleeting feeling of belonging, of affinity to the group. Bridging past and present, hopes and histories, familiarity and newness, cultural performances can create and strengthen the sense of community and belonging as suggested by Turner. Turner (1982:48) also describes *communitas* as the experience of ritual camaraderie, when in a liminal, anti-structure state in which people are freed from everyday life roles and all personal and social differences are erased, a moment when people are uplifted and taken over by the situation, very close to many descriptions of the April movement. In this section and the next I will focus on theatrical performances and performative forms of protests as sites of creation and *communitas*.

Protests are characterized by historically and culturally specific ways of 'staging' dissent acquired through previous practice. Like acting, protesting is a form of behaviour that is learned through observing and participating in various social activities (Wasserstrom 1999:75). As in theatrical performances, the people involved improvise and innovate out of a common set of familiar 'scripts' or 'repertoire' that constitute systems of collective representations. Schechner brings into play two different concepts in theatre that can also be useful to understand such protest: 'rehearsals' and 'preparations' (1993:54). While the former sets an 'exact sequence of events', the latter makes members of a group ready to 'do something appropriate' at a given moment. In fact, demonstrators employ past successful scripts and spontaneously improvise out of a common set of experiences. Demonstrations thus become cultural laboratories in which to experiment and rehearse new ways of being and prepare for actualizing them. Protests often take up the forms of 'performative actions' in which the protestors in the street, at the climax of their protest, enact in different ways in the world they would like to live in. It may be just illusion, yet, 'social life depends on illusions such as those theatre exhibits and refines; and social action is dependent on a suspension of form. Society constantly attempts to realise itself through particular acts that are explained by reference to an

imagined order of things, which is thereby confirmed' (Hastrup 2004:53). Although the form itself may be not 'real', the action actually is.

What follows is an outline of the dramaturgy of protest that emerges from the analysis of secondary sources integrated with interviews. News websites¹⁰⁵ reported the slogans that were sung in the streets. Other than the common *loktantra jindabad* 'long live people's democracy', *nirankustantra murdabad*, *rajtantra murdabad*, 'down with autocracy and monarchy', others slogans focused on the king and his close collaborators. For example *Gyané chor, desh chhod* 'Gyané¹⁰⁶ thief, leave the country', 'burn the crown', 'Hang king Gyanendra', and 'Hang Thapa' which referred to the Minister of Internal Affairs who was considered responsible for the violent street repression. The prince was targeted through *Paras rukhma jhundha*, 'Paras hang yourself on a tree'. Other question/response choirs invited all the Nepali citizens to join into one voice:

Nepali jantale ke bhanchha? What do Nepali people say/order?

Ganatantra lyau bhanchha. Let's bring in republic

Others, instead, personified Arya *ghat* in Pasupatinath calling the king and his son to their last rites:

Arya ghatle ke bhanchha? Who does Arya ghat call?

Gyan Paraslai bhanchha. It calls Gyan and Paras.

Or

Ja ja Paras katro kin. Go go Paras buy a *katro* (white cloth used to cover a corpse).

Tera bau ko ayo din. Your [low form] father's day has come.

Others reclaimed the people's agency in governing the country

Sri panch hami chilaunchhaun. We burn His Majesty.

Desh hami chalanchhaun. We will run the country.

Slogans also found modern and technological ways to travel. According to mysansar.com, the following SMS was being circulated throughout Nepal in reaction to the curfew: *Yadi tapaiko mutuma Nepali Ragat bageko chha bhane Swatantra Nepal ko Nirman garna Baishak 7 gate sadak ma utrunus!! thulo sworma bhannus, "Loktantra Jindabaad"*. 'If you have Nepali blood flowing in your veins, come to the street on April 20th to establish an independent Nepal and say "Long live people's

¹⁰⁵ In this section I have collected data from websites like nepalnews, kantipuronline, the himalayantimes online, and independent blogs between April and May 2006.

¹⁰⁶ 'Gyané' is the short name usually employed by protestors to contemptuously address King Gyanendra.

democracy". IF you cannot come to the street AND NOT IN KTM, just say, "LOKTANTRA JINDABAAD", wherever you are. And, pass on...' (the translation comes from an email that I received). The impact of these slogans on the everyday lives of Nepali citizens is not easy to estimate, but certainly continued beyond the liminal time of the protests. Travelling in West Nepal in May 2006, Amit Sengupta tells of children playreal ing with the demonstration slogans, shouting 'Loktantric Ganatantra', democracy, democracy, republic, republic, like a childhood chant of magical freedom' (Tehelka June 3rd, 2006).

Under 'normal circumstances', the king has the authoritative role to utter declarations that can change the social world. The protestors reversed his role by temporarily and imaginatively taking up the authority to proclaim alternative forms of government.¹⁰⁷ Protestors declared many areas 'free zones'. For example, despite the restrictive orders imposed by the government, on April 6th demonstrators gathered in Chyasal, Patan, chased away the security forces and released the arrested leaders of political parties declaring Chyasal *mukta kshetra*, a 'liberated zone'. Similarly, Chitwan district (South Nepal) was declared a 'republic region' on April 8th (nepalnews).

'Renaming' was also employed as a means to erase the monarchical past and establish a new secular reality. 'His Majesty's Government' was replaced with 'Nepal Government' well before the declaration of the House of Representatives on May 18th 2005.¹⁰⁸ Groups of protestors altered the signboards of the local offices. The symbolic redesign of the landscape included also the renaming of streets and roads. For example, 'Mahendra Multiple Campus' in Gorahi, Dang District, was declared 'Republican Multiple Campus' (INSN reports). Bhorletar Chowk the main crossroad of Damauli was renamed 'Republican Chowk' while 'Clean Road Chowk' became 'Democracy Chowk' (www.nepalnews.com), thus sweeping away at once both royal – as in the government offices and campuses – and developmental histories. Student organizations affiliated to SPA changed the signboards of many campuses. The whole Shah family was the target of a symbolic historical erasure. Particularly significant spaces in the capital were renamed. Kalanki *chowk*, an area in the West part of the capital in which violent clashes between protestors and security forces led to the killing of some demonstrators, was renamed *Loktantra chowk*, 'democracy junction' (April 21st, www.nepalnews.com). An informant told me that in everyday conversations in 2006, students still referred to a *chowk* inside

¹⁰⁷ During the months before the April movement civil society groups staged mock parliaments in the streets though I have never personally seen any.

¹⁰⁸ On May 18th, the House of Parliament unanimously passed a proposal in which royal power was drastically curtailed, executive power was handed over to council of ministers, 'HMG (His Majesty Government of) Nepal' was changed into 'Government of Nepal', RNA (Royal Nepal Army) turned into 'Nepali Army'.

Tribhuvan University *Loktantra chowk*, as it was renamed during the movement. Soon after the House of Parliament declaration, employees of many government or semi-government agencies were reported as painting or printing new signs for the boards of their offices (www.nepalnews.com), anticipating the official restructuring.

Political slogans and renaming do not fit easily into Austin's category of 'speech act'. Both Austin and Searle used the term 'speech act' to describe performative utterances in which 'to say something is to *do* something' like 'I take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife' (Schechner 2002:110-12). They both distinguished 'normal real world talk' from 'parasitic forms of discourse' such as poetry, fiction or theatre in which the words don't actualize the action. However, performance theories and practices have revealed the collapsing of differences between 'fiction' and 'real', and thus question Austin and Searle's theories on the account that they don't recognize that art can be a model for, rather than a mirror of life (Ibid. 111). However, political slogans fall into a different category from the dialogue spoken by an actor on-stage. Because of a symbolic enactment of the action, the context of performance and the way in which they affect the environment, political slogans may become a model for what they 'perform', and are perceived by the opponents as a serious and real threat. Describing student protests in China, Wasserstrom (1991:18) remarks that 'even when youth movements did not constitute *physical* threats to the status quo, student protesters posed very real *symbolic* threats. Through their words and deeds, they raised doubts in the mind of the audience about the right of those in power to rule', while performing visions of a different society. As elements of the political landscape, place names express both the ideological themes of the state and the political processes that states are involved in (Yong 2007). Place names are 'active', 'context-generating as well as context-reflecting' (Ibid.). 'Renaming' is an action, an act of creation, the exercise of agency and a claim of authority. Like singing slogans, renaming is a speech act that symbolically accomplishes the action performed in a real way. While slogans represent a powerful though transient political threat, renaming represents a more permanent challenge. The signs of this symbolic battle outlived the people's movement. Silent witnesses on the walls of Kathmandu, the new names adjacent to the cancelled-out old ones, remained for many months after April 2006.

Burning was a common street protest action. It was often carried out together with road blockades and stone and brick throwing. Burning the tyres of government vehicles and offices characterizes many agitations in Nepal, from student rallies to the more recent protests carried out by some Hindu organizations (THT, May 24th, 2006) against declaring Nepal a secular state (May 18th, 2006). Royal authority was also debased through the act of burning. The photos of the king and

queen of Nepal adorned most Nepali houses and were compulsory in all government offices. Moreover, traditionally, the royal couple were not supposed to be depicted in cartoons. Yet, during the April movement, not only symbols of the state were ignited, but also effigies, posters, photos and images of the royal family. They were first displaced from their place of authority and veneration inside offices and hospitals, and then set on bonfires in the streets. Fire is a particularly loaded symbol in Nepal. Destruction by fire recalls death and purification.

Black outs and *mashal julus* (torch rallies) were organized by SPA in Kathmandu against the mass arrests, the repression of demonstrations, and against the royal proclamation. The Valley observed a black out from 8:15 to 8:30 pm. I received an email saying that

when the political parties and citizens' community called for an evening blackout (8-8:30) in Kathmandu this evening, you know what happened? Literally more than 99 percent of the city was dark, and people came out to the streets or on the top of the houses and shouted, played music, clapped hands...and the shouting flew in waves from one end to the other of this city, like the shouting of the wolves moves from one hill to the other'.¹⁰⁹

Symbolism connected to light/darkness is rich and widens the significance of both black outs and *julus*. Burghart (1996:312) reports that in 1985 teachers organized a protest lantern rally in broad daylight to publicly state that 'the kingdom had become so dark from injustice that honest men now found themselves obliged to guide themselves by lantern-light even in the light of day'. The connotation of the light of fire therefore works at different levels. Flames can bring destruction and death, but after that they can bring justice.

During street rallies, some traditional rituals were adapted to the situation, transformed, and their religious meaning was reversed. Staging the funeral of the monarchy recurred in different forms. Puppets of the king were taken to Pashupatinath, conch shells were blown and green branches waved during rallies. In Bhadrapur, headquarter of Jhapa district, the 'corpse' of autocracy was prepared and taken out in a 'Shroud March':

After setting out from Chandragadhi and circumnavigating the bazaar, the Shroud March reached Sagarmatha Chowk where last rites were performed for the corpse of autocracy. In the Shroud March, just like in a real funeral procession, the corpse was bound with freshly cut bamboo and conches were sounded while at the same time slogans against autocracy and for full democracy were chanted' (INSN report, 8th April 2006).

¹⁰⁹ Shyam and Shoni, personal email, April 21st 2006.

Even the statues of the Shah kings were hit by the anger of the crowd in different places. For example, in Mahendranagar pro-democracy activists toppled the statue of Mahendra and removed the royal sceptre, glasses and crown. In a statement reported by Workers World (April 14) Prachanda and Bhattarai were reported to have ordered, among other things, the destruction of all royal statues and signs referring to HMG to be carried out by the PLA (People's Liberation Army).

In the Mahendranagar bazaar, students paraded the photos of King Gyanendra and Queen Komal garlanded with a necklace of shoes:

Despite the efforts by the police to snatch the photos away, the students put up fierce resistance and completed their circuit through the bazaar. As they processed through the bazaar residents standing on the sidelines clapped and offered flower necklaces (*mala*) to the protestors, in welcome and as an expression of their solidarity. Among those welcoming the spectacle were government office workers. After the procession the royal couple's photos were smeared with soot, draped with sandal and set on fire (INSN report, 11th April 2006).

In such a way, protestors adopted, adapted and then subverted a deeply humiliating punishment traditional in the villages. When a person has done something that the community condemns as absolutely despicable the person is decorated with a shoe *mala*, the face smeared with black soot (*kalo moso*) and often banished forever from the community. Parading throughout the public places of the city is a cultural device that deepens dishonour and damages people's reputation. This time, it was the king's turn. Such mocking displays contrast with the royal tours of the Emergency period.

On one occasion, a photo of King Gyanendra was tied on the head of a donkey and paraded in a donkey rally. According to some of my informants, donkeys are commonly seen as animals that do not use their intellect, that do not have their own volition and operate through vested interests. The political reversal is striking. In the Hindu polity the king was supposed to embody the intentionality of the nation (Burghart 1996:304). On another occasion, demonstrators made a very simple effigy of the king, a plastic balloon as head, sticks for the arms, dressed with rags and a few shoes on his neck. The divine king was 'constructed' as a poor man. His role was desecrated. Images of animals were recurrent: the dog, a 'low' and 'mean' animal was given respect and honour like a king through the *Abhinandan* (felicitations) a formula that is employed when addressing respectful people. The king was thus equalled to a dog.

Both in Kathmandu and in the rest of the country journalists reported mass rallies in which protestors chanted slogans while 'playing' household utensils and tools¹¹⁰ (INSN reports). Moreover, very often during demonstration or work people wore black bands on their arms to symbolize the repression they were resisting (Ithari and Biratnagar, 20 April, nepaleyes.com).

Flags are another interesting element in the mass movement. Most of the photos and reports described people waving party flags, either the red and white-starred flag of the Nepali Congress or the hammer and sickle flag of the communist parties. There were no national Nepali flags, which were instead flown in national celebrations or royalist rallies. This suggests that in that context, most of the people identified with political parties rather than with a 'national' identity or saw correctly that the king had arrogated national identity to himself.

From the analysis of the dramaturgy of protest in Nepal, two overarching symbolic and opposite themes emerge, life and death, as if to mark the end of an era and the birth of a new one. Protestors played on these themes through 'symbolic inversion' (Babcock 1978) in multiple arenas. Babcock describes symbolic inversion as 'any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social and political' (Ibid. 14). According to Babcock, symbolic inversion is closely related to irony, parody and paradox. By reversing the symbols commonly employed in hegemonic constructs, protestors set off for a process of 'resignification' through which hegemonic symbols and practices are first publicly recognized and then contested (Whitten 2003). Babcock (Ibid.) stressed the central role of negation in the systems of meaning in which we live and communicate (Firth 1980). She focuses on the existence of the 'implied negative' – 'the not-thing' as opposed to 'the thing' – that often goes unnoticed but turns upside down commonly accepted cultural codes (Babcock *ibid*). This recalls the double negative 'me/not me' characterizing restored behaviour described by Schechner (see Chapter one, 2.2.2).

During the movement, innovation and tradition went hand in hand with the colourful, bizarre and spontaneous performances described above. Street protests can thus be conceptualised as events that create the lived-in-world (cf. Handelman). Their design aims at bringing about change but the cultural means through which it is advocated is linked to traditional culture. The cultural repertoire that de-legitimized the king's power paradoxically belongs to the same well-known rites of Hindu

¹¹⁰ Ramesh' song (see above) was probably inspired by this methodology of protesting. Citizens protested with their working tools and joined in professional groups even during Jana Andolan 1990 (Hachhethu 1990:177).

Nepal. Yet, symbols and rituals were appropriated and then employed through reversal. Power was dissolved through reversing the rituals that legitimized it.

Ridicule, mockery and caricature emerge as important tropes in most of the examples discussed above. Some parodies and animal caricatures recalled popular Gai Jatra street sketches. When applied to the highest-ranking political and religious authority of the country, protest actions, such as smearing photos with black or publicly parading effigies, became 'rituals of humiliation'. Death, enacted through unpredictable sequences of destruction and creation, was also recurrent. Burning effigies, photos, puppets or performing funeral rituals were means of symbolically and performatively ending the king's despotic rule. In the context of death, burning is ritually significant. If performed respectfully, it honours a person with a final tribute and assures the community that the dead person becomes an ancestor. The context and tone of the street performances aimed just at the opposite: the king was still alive and the protestors wanted to eliminate him from their country's genealogy. According to a functionalist argument (Gluckman cited in Firth 1980; Davis cited in Babcock 1978) rites of reversal allow for the harmless expression of latent social tensions and support the established order. In contrast, other anthropologists (Firth 1980; Kertzer 1988) claim that symbolic reversal can undermine as well as strengthen beliefs in the conventional values. In the case of the anti-monarchy demonstrations, the rites of reversal turned into rituals of humiliation. The commonly accepted codes and rituals that legitimized the 'theatre-state' served to dismantle it and once again revealed its fictionality. Not only was the pomp not powerful anymore, it became ridiculous because it was no more contained within a structure of order/authority.

The correlation between the dramaturgy of protest performed in Jana Andolan 1990 and 2006 are surprising, as well as the government's reaction. Propaganda war, detention of party activists and common citizens, governmental repression which aroused international indignation and concern, unemployed youths and campus students at the forefront of the rallies, professional groups actively involved in the movement, citizens marching on the streets brandishing kitchen utensils and agricultural tools, civil servants supporting the protests, are all common to both movements (Hachhethu 1990). Even in 1990 the palace failed to acknowledge the existence of an opposition until finally King Birendra deleted 'partylessness' from the Constitution and lifted the ban on political parties (Ibid. 183). The 1990 movement was also strongly anti royalist: 'the king's active patronage of the PS (Panchayat System) had become a focal point of public criticism throughout the movement. In every corner of the city, there were cartoons and wall paintings showing popular resentment against the palace' (Ibid. 181). Not only did symbols and tactics from past protests reveal continuity with a past tradition. Earlier protests also lent legitimacy to the newer movement (Kertzer 1988:122)

The dramaturgy of protest emerging from the April 2005 movement includes rhetorical tropes and a gestural vocabulary derived from familiar scripts taken from successful earlier protests as well as from daily activities, shared rituals and stories. Demonstrators improvised, sometimes mocking, sometimes modifying or subverting given patterns. They reclaimed the power of representation and thus contested received narratives. Standardization and repetitiveness gives ritual its stability. Stability and familiarity connects ritual to strongly felt emotion, 'emotions experienced in past enactments of the ritual re-emerge at subsequent enactments' (Kertzer *ibid.*). This holds true also in subversive ritualistic enactments aimed at fostering social change. In fact, new political systems acquire legitimacy by directing old ritual forms to new purposes (*Ibid.* 42). In this case, cultural ritual forms were used to delegitimize the king. In a way, the beginning of the de-Shahization of Nepal, and the dismantling of the ritual system centred on the Shah kings, recall other symbolic delegitimization campaigns, such as the de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union in the 1960s (Schechner 1993). As urged by Haugerud (2004), because of the passion with which protests are undertaken, and the discourses about history and identity embedded in their dramaturgy, the anthropology of protest should find a more central place in the social science.

Although 'end', 'destruction', and 'death' were recurrent symbols in the streets, the reported atmosphere was not gloomy. It was an end that brought the excitement of a new beginning. Some of my informants wrote emails saying that despite the danger and violence, the environment at the mass rallies was cheerful, especially at the last ones. People in the streets were cheering:

We hadn't gone out for the last 15 days. Today we heard a very loud noise on the highway and went. There was a sea of people which took three hours to pass way. Then there were gunshots, and thousands of them started running back, trampling and perhaps killing a few, along with a child. Those who were before us said they saw the army men shooting dozens of them in the head and then taking the injured (massacred?) people into their trucks. Yesterday a murdered carpenter's wife was made to sign on a blank paper, which was later filled with the statement that the deceased was testified (by the wife) as a terrorist and aired by Nepal Television' [...] But, however grim the situation, Mon, don't fear, we are strong, our spirit will never be dampened by a single madman's suppression. [...] For when a people is making its history with its own hands, a free people is also happy. If you had seen the smile, the jubilant mood in the faces of the 5 hundred thousand people marching the streets of Kathmandu this afternoon'... (Shyam and Shony, email April 22nd, 2006).

Street protests were characterized by a festive, carnivalesque and cheerful mood, coexisting with danger, fear and death in a creative tension. Demonstrations were full of excitement for the unknown that opened the space for improvisation. Such excitement 'is rooted in the tension between known patterns of action, stunning instantaneous surprises, and a passionately desired yet uncertain outcomes' (Schechner 1993:71). Such enthusiasm, however, is also strongly linked to the real

possibilities of change, not just to dreams and imagination. The symbolic actions of renaming, or enacting the death of oppressors, represented a physical materialization of a desire. Though the object was shifted because of obvious reasons, through their theatrical dimension the actions performed were real. As a result, participation gave protestors power, the assertion of agency itself was a reason for acting, a 'constitutive and expressive reason' (Wood 2001). Wood (2001) pointed out that the key logic of insurgent collective action in Peru was the assertion of dignity through the act of rebelling, an honour which empowered only the people who actually participated in the struggle. The reasons and the benefits were emotional, but it did not imply that they were irrational.

Let us move now from the 'theatre of protest' to the 'theatre for protest' on the stage. The next sections outline how the political turmoil affected both theatrical stage production and the performance of development theatre. I will then move to depict how theatrical plays added to the creativity expressed in the street protests. Actors' experiences and motivation will subsequently provide an ethnographic account of how the theatre world spurred the protestors into real action.

5. Closed streets, and an open stage

February 1st 2005 marked the end of my research project as it had been devised in London and the beginning of a new phase governed by the unfolding of events. *Kachahari* theatre could not be performed in the streets any more because of the Emergency laws. The public space had been cleared for the 'performance of authority' and no competing narratives were allowed. The Emergency laws also banned public meetings of more than 5 people. Yet, inconsistencies in those regulations emerged. It soon became evident that the distance between the ordinances in theory and their actual implementation in practice, or the police's control over them, was rather loose and interesting. From 3rd February 2005 Gurukul had a new program crammed with performances. The program was meant to be the beginning of the new strategy aimed at staging daily performances to create a regular audience in Kathmandu.

Despite the Emergency, the rehearsal of 'Dreams of Peach Blossom' at Sama Theatre continued. Resistance in Gurukul took an immediate, though invisible shape. Sunil Pokharel decided that the group would carry on with everyday activities and performances as if nothing had happened, despite the bans. They would stop the plays only if soldiers came inside the compound to prohibit them. And they never came. During the first performance of 'Dreams of Peach Blossom' the actors were rather tense because of the unpredictable government reactions to the breach of the ban on

assembly. However, it became increasingly obvious that there would be no interruption. Gurukul soon became a strong reference point for Nepali theatre. It was the only place where performances were running on an almost daily basis. However, the current political situation of the country was totally absent from the content of the performances staged. In a sort of strategic self-censoring Aarohan Theatre group decided to keep a low political profile. The director explained that his main objective was to keep Gurukul open throughout the government prohibitions, so that it could become a safe meeting place in case opposition groups needed to gather. In fact, the group never performed radical dramas directly challenging the regime. At the same time, the king's government never interfered with the shows. Sunil was conscious of the danger of defying the Emergency rules but it seemed a reasonable risk. The group's strategy to cope with the Emergency restrictions therefore aimed at maintaining a 'public space' inside Gurukul while providing distancing, harmless entertainment that was far from the pressing political reality and would not directly question the authorities. Yet, as I mentioned at the opening of chapter two, actors were asked not to comment in public about the political situation. The compound was deliberately created and sustained as the 'fictional space' required by the Emergency laws. Political discussions were confined to the private and Gurukul was turned into an 'a-political' distraction location. The group retained their power by self-censoring themselves (cf. Lukes 2005). Sunil replaced his editorial in the group's magazine with a reversed mask and the following caption (see photo):



The country is in emergency. This time the sutradhar self-censored himself, the space is empty. In this empty space you can write your thoughts.

The fiction was clear.

The Emergency period saw the rebirth of Nepali stage theatre despite the repression carried out over other media. Prevented by the censors from commenting on any political or news-related issues, the media extensively covered the theatrical performances. Newspaper articles about the three different plays that were scheduled for February 2005 – *Dreams of Peach Blossom*, *A Doll's House* and *Fire in the Monastery*¹¹¹ - were published almost every day. The plays were featured during television news broadcasts. Actors gathered early in the morning under the hay shed in the compound, shivering with the cold, sipping a cup of milk tea while the haze hugged the valley. They checked newspaper reviews and photos. Audience numbers increased day after day.

As soon as the series of performances ended, the rehearsals for *Jat Sodhun Jogiko* (Ask the Sadhu about his Caste) started. The play, performed by Aarohan and directed by Anup Baral soon became a smash hit. The comedy was adapted from a play written by the Marathi playwright VijayTendulkar. After *Jat Sodhun Jogiko* – performed from March to May 2005 almost without interruption - came *Bagh Bhairav*, a play written and performed by Satyamohan Joshi with Aarohan in July and August. *Tara Baji lai lai*, an improvisation-based play directed by the Norwegian Morten Krogh, centred upon images of childhood. In December 2006 *Bari lai lai*, directed by Birendra Hamal, ran for a week. This was the first time since February 1st that the political context clearly re-entered the stage.

Contradictions in the application of the Emergency laws paradoxically arrived also from the government institutions. In mid-April 2005, that is during the Emergency, and despite prohibitions on mass gathering, the Royal Nepal Academy ran the National Theatre Festival. It was a great success. After many years of crisis it attracted huge audiences. At a rate of three performances each afternoon, theatre groups from different parts of the country performed their unique visions of Nepal and of its theatre. The atmosphere became electric when, despite the Royal Nepal Academy being a government run body, a group staged a very realistic play in which two brothers, one belonging to RNA and the other to PLA, met in their natal home. After some moments of fear, instead of killing one another, they hugged. The auditorium, usually noisy and full of chattering during the performances, became silent at the portrayal of a real life dilemma.

Other theatre groups reacted to the state of Emergency in different ways. In contrast to Aarohan, who continued to perform despite the King's ban, Sarwanam Theatre Group protested the restrictions by cancelling their annual April commemorative performance which celebrates the group's establishment. Afterwards, however, in December 2005, they engaged in a nation-wide tour that re-enacted resistance through the performance of a play first staged 25 years before, when there was a

¹¹¹ Both 'Dreams of Peach Blossom' and 'Fire in the Monastery' were written by Abhi Subedi. 'A Doll's House' is an adaptation of Ibsen's play to the Nepali context. All the three plays were directed by Sunil Pokharel.

similar situation of oppression and lack of freedom. History was repeating itself and the theatrical performance of *Hami Basant Khojirahechhau* (We are looking for Spring) bears witness. Ashesh Malla selected actors below 25 years of age to testify that Nepali youth were facing the same problems as had their fathers. If for young people the play reflected the country's contemporary struggle, for older members of the audience the play was particularly effective in reviving past sentiments.

Despite the Emergency prohibitions, the theatre in Kathmandu flourished. Through a careful balance of defiance and self-censorship, the aesthetic and heterotopic space of the theatre was protected. The theatrical activities found great popular appreciation, probably fulfilling the citizens' need for breaking away from the hardships of daily life. The theatre as a physical space would play an important role in the development of the resistance and opposition movement in Nepal, as I will detail in the next subsection.

5.1. *Loktantrik natak*, or theatre for democracy

Aarohan Theatre Group staged what they called *loktantrik natak* (theatre for democracy) both in CMDP public meetings (*dharna*) and in the streets of Kathmandu. The 'genre' grew spontaneously out of the development of the political situation. Actors participated through personal choice, as their individual contribution to the popular movement. Collectively created by the actors from topical events, the plays were staged in the realistic and minimalist style of the street theatre. Between 2005 and 2006 Aarohan participated at various CMDP mass meetings. In this section I will compare two performances. The first was staged in January, the second in August 2006. I aim to show artists' tactics of engaging the political crisis at different stages of domination.

The pro-democracy meeting in New Baneshwor on January 29th, 2006 was rather tense (see fig. 7-15). While preparing the stage for the speakers on a lorry, the organizers had to negotiate permission from the police patrolling the area.

Actors from Aarohan were very worried because the previous days a group of artists had been arrested after a street poetry reading. The squared performance area in front of the lorry was marked by ropes, around which the audience sat and stood. The artists chose to perform an allegory because of the high danger of being arrested. Sunil explained to the audience that the poem he was going to read and the story the actors were going to present was not about Nepal. It was about Germany during the Nazi rule. His words starkly contrasted with the scene that was being developed by the actors inside the square. Actors shaped a map of Nepal on the street with two ropes, and then,



Fig.7. The audience starts gathering around the lorry that functions as stage. A squared area is delimited by ropes in front of the lorry to allow for the theatrical performance by Aarohan Theatre Group.



Fig.8. Members of CMDP introduce the programme. By sitting on the pavement inside the rope, the audience would later gain space and from time to time mix with the artists.



Fig.9. Sunil Pokharel on the microphone recounts the tale while the artists perform the actions.



Fig.10. Om Prakash sets the ropes delimiting the space where the citizens are obliged to move. Some members of the audience play with the rope marking the aesthetic space.



Fig.11. Bhola, other citizens and I still searching for a way out.



Fig.12. Kamal manages to free himself while Rajan juggles between co-actors, speakers and photographers.



Fig.13. Even Rajan breaks free from the rope while in the background Suresh is caught in the effort of liberating himself.



Fig.14. Pashupati and Mahesh exult. Performers and spectators mix.



Fig.15. Samuna, Nisha and I also enjoy the newly conquered freedom.

around the map, they embodied different sketches of everyday life in Nepal: kids playing with pebbles, women engaged in house chores, men in the fields or talking, people squatting and watching. The images remained frozen for the duration of the poem.

When the recitation ended, two Nazi soldiers entered to the sound of machine-guns. Wearing black leather jackets, the two actors mimed the shooting with empty hands and pushed all the people inside the map, violently throwing one over the other. The soldiers picked up the ropes that marked the map and formed a corridor, from where all the actors emerged wearing black blindfolds on their eyes, and stumbling in the darkness. The people inside the ropes moved slowly, trying to figure out what was going on, searching in the air with tense, raised hands. The two black soldiers could thus govern the corridor of dictatorship. The people inside were powerless. Then, one among the blindfolded managed to find a way out and started walking, hesitantly, soon to be pushed back inside by a few rounds of machine-gun. People continued to falter and search in the dark. Another person moved out, and then another. But again, they were frightened back in by the machine-gun. Tension increased. This time, however, those who survived the previous exit began whispering to others, the whisper formed a chain and spread. The corridor became animated, people spread their voice in different directions. All of a sudden, lifting the blindfolds, they burst free, forcing the ropes open, and regained liberty.

The allegory was clear. By displacing the story geographically and historically, the actors never mentioned the king or Nepal by words. The blindfolds signalled the darkness produced by the autocracy, obliging people to stay within 'the lines'. The connection between Hitler and the king was straightforward. However, even the people who did not know about Germany could clearly understand what actors meant and what they encouraged the audience to do. The aesthetic space multiplied the image of reality that the actors wanted to reflect, allowing the audience to imbue with personal significance the suggestions acted in the street. Allegory is a rhetorical device often employed to defy censorship. For example, a Spanish radical popular theatre group hid references to Franco's dictatorship in the play *Castanuela 70* by talking about the fall of the Roman Empire (van Erven 1988:155).

During the People's Movement in April 2006, the group decided to stop regular stage drama performances and moved into the streets. Gurukul had been for the previous months a safe space where opposition groups could meet, perform and freely discuss the political situation. But the protests in the street called for a more active involvement. Basanta Bhatta, the group manager and an actor himself, recalls that the group organized a big gathering – 350-400 people - inviting poets, artists, journalists, film producers and actors to put pressure upon political parties and civil society, and to publicly condemn the repression in the streets. April 12th 2006 turned into another 'black day'

that characterized the movement. The senior playwright and 'culture expert'¹¹² Satya Mohan Joshi chaired the meeting. Yet, when the whole group moved into the street towards Purano Baneshwor Chowk to recite poems outside the compound, the police attacked the demonstrators, beating and arresting many artists. They chased artists even from inside the Gurukul compound, where some tried to find protection, firing bullets in the air. Watching again the images video-recorded by the camera operator four months later, Mani Pokharel said he still felt shivers. Basanta remembers the fear for the closure of Gurukul, the desire for freedom, the wish to go into the streets, concern for the future of the people's movement, and for the destiny of the group itself. Basanta recalls that for three days they did not go to Gurukul. Female artists stayed in Sunil's house and the male in other houses for fear of what the government could do at night. Police surrounded Gurukul for three days, and stationed themselves inside. Actors temporarily abandoned their 'membership' participation in street protests but continued, divided through their residential locations, as individuals in their own right.

In August 2006 CMDP organized a meeting in Basantapur Durbar Square, on the *dabali*, to press for the accomplishment of the peace process. It also involved cultural performances such as songs, poems and drama. The view from the *dabali* was spectacular. A huge mass of people sitting on the big steps of the Durbar, the square was packed and all eyes were focused on the open stage. Since the political and performative space had opened after April's movement, the play performed by Aarohan dramatized and referred to the political development in a much more detailed and specific manner. All the key political actors were present: the king, the political leaders, civil society, the UN. Even the characters in the plays became more personally characterized and were thus easily recognized by the audience. I describe the key scenes (see fig. 16-21).

The play opened with a still image of an actor pointing his index finger towards the sky. At the sound of cymbals, a voice from the backstage recalled key dates in the history of Nepal, during which the 'king', posing as a statue, greeted the audience and smiled, until the arrival of People's Movement. At that moment, actors who were kneeling around the statue, raised themselves, covered the statue with a black cloth and brought it down. They started shouting slogans. The atmosphere of the protest was recreated. '*Ganatantra — Jindabad*', '*Loktantra — Jindabad*'. The pace of the play was fast. The black cloth became a sheet, and was held across the opened arms of a common citizen, as if for begging. *Malai chahiyo* (I need it) he repeatedly shouted, while walking around the platform asking for democracy. '*Nepali Kangress, malai chahiyo*' (Nepali Congress, I need it), he cried to another

¹¹² Satya Mohan Joshi, as well as other senior artists, was often defined as 'culture expert'. In fact, they were considered as the bearers of traditional knowledge about folk dance, music, and festivals.

actor wearing a *topi*. The NC [Nepali Congress] leader put some money on the black sheet. 'I don't need money, I need *loktantrik ganatantra*' he said. The NC leader sent him away to look for it somewhere else, saying they were subject to international pressure and there was a long waiting period ahead. Whirling, the 'citizen', approached the UML representative with the same question. '*Loktantrik ganatantra bhanera bhanda kheri...*' (What I mean by republican democracy....) [just rambling, non meaning in the sentence] said the UML leader. But his monologue, overstated through concerned gesticulation, did not reach any point, and he sent the 'citizen' away. '*Hajur, malai chahiyo*' (Sir, I need it) the citizen repeated, spinning on the *dabali* to the next corner, where there was a pair composed of a tall and a short man. The tall one wore a cap and stood to the back, while the short one did all the talking. '*Tapailai ke chahiyo?* (what do you need?), began the Maoist leader. 'We first need to find an agreement about arms management', he continued, reassuring the citizen, 'Your things and our things are the same. I'm also committed to *loktantrik ganatantra*'. '*Malai chahiyo*', the citizen repeated. '*Malai loktantrik ganatantra chahiyo*' he continued, moving towards the representative of civil society who replied that they wanted the same thing too, but the government is slow, the issue is complex, and they are suffering like him. Then the 'citizen' moved towards the front and addressed the real audience directly with the same, recurrent question, '*Malai chahiyo, malai dinus*' [I need it – republican democracy, give it to me]

The next scene showed a comic recruitment of vigilantes. The king's officer, who wore a joker's hat, explained the job to the recruits: basically, saving Vishnu *bhagwan* - God Vishnu - the king, circulating propaganda, beating and arresting people, all for a wage of NRs 14,000 a month. He added that 25,000 *sadhus* were coming from India because 'Nepal is a Hindu country and they have to take care of *bhagwan* Vishnu'. The candidates, grinning as they accepted the offer, demonstrated their beating skills. They were ritually, and mockingly, invested with power through the placement of a cymbal over their heads. The recruiter intoned a Hindu religious hymn, *Raghupati raghav rajaram* and the vigilantes started rapping a reply on the same tune....*paisa line darbar jaun* (Let's go to the palace to take the money), one of them waving a stick in the air.



Fig. 16. The common citizen played by Ram Hari requests, with a red cloth, *lok tantrik ganatantra* to the Maoist leader played by Bhola.



Fig.17. The Nepali Congress leader, played by Suresh, on the TV speech.



Fig.18. Kamal, the recruiter, smiles with pride while preparing his vigilantes, played by Rajan and Pasupati.



Fig. 19. People get knot in the complexity of the political scenario.

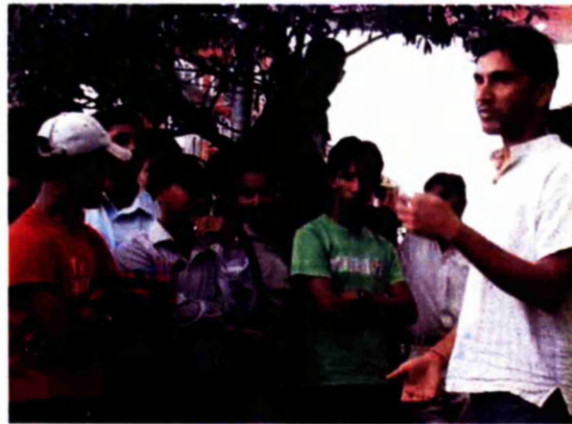


Fig.20. Yuvaraj as joker discusses with the audience and asks for possible way out.



Fig.21. Rehearsing the continuation of the play. Actors show how different groups of demonstrators fight to secure for themselves the best road where to sit for a *bandha*. The best place is that which gives more visibility and media coverage.

Actors embodying citizens' emotions entered one after the other, lamenting that the people's movement was over but that nothing had changed. They expressed disillusionment over the politicians' idle chatter. In fact, in reality, the process of arms management was not proceeding, there was no security, some people were still collecting forced donation money, the army was still singing songs for the king, there was no interim constitution, etc. Back on stage, the citizens held hands and tried to find a solution but the more they moved, the more entangled they became. Meanwhile the vigilantes came, singing their songs, and like puppets tried to break through the group of citizens. Then the songs stopped. What remained was a rhythmic, and ridiculing '*hee, hee, hee, hee*'. Pretending to be citizens, the vigilantes entered the group and broke the, however confused, unity.

Next scene. TV news anchored by a comic presenter. First, he introduced the American ambassador, who peremptorily affirmed that the US government would never accept a government that includes the Maoists, unless the rebels renounced their weapons. The TV audience, sitting in the centre of the *dabali*, mimed that they could not understand English. Then came the NC representative who, referring to their long history, stated that they needed to maintain a ceremonial king. People spat. Maoists, basing their commitment on the fact that they have 'stomachs' just like the audience, reaffirmed their stance towards *loktantrik ganatantra* and explained that collecting money was necessary to feed their soldiers. UML rambled, rambled and rambled... they were ready. Just what they were ready for, was not clear. An aeroplane suddenly arrived. A UN representative stepped out with an interpreter. They admired the landscape, 'what a beautiful country', and smiled like idiots to the photographer. They undertook a hopeless tour of the parties in order to understand the political situation. The sleeping NC leader was woken up, whereby he repeated the same story as the TV interview before. At the beginning, the interpreter translated a few words, but within a short time the dialogue had turned into a mocking gibberish dance, as each leader sent the pair to talk to the next. Finally, the UN representative and her translator, shocked and confused, boarded the plane and took off.

The civil society leader reminded the real audience about their suffering during the movement, and asked them not to close their mouths, eyes, and ears. Actors were not dancing, she said, and warned: *khabardar* (watch out).

Although the performance space was well defined in both dramas described above, the actors chose to perform with their own everyday clothes, without using any theatrical costumes. The props were reduced to the minimum so that the few elements present on the stage acquired symbolic

connotations (i.e. the rope and the leather jackets of the Nazi soldiers in the first skit, the black cloth, the *topi* and the vigilantes' stick in the second). In the second skit the political critique became overt and situation-specific. Despite internal contradictions, in reality both the government and CPN(M) had sought UN intervention in the peace process by similar but independent letters. Satire could easily take off. Political leaders were caricatured. Actors used body language and rhetorical mannerism to characterize the different roles. For example, the king's celebratory and reassuring gestures became a mask of fear just before the crowd subsumed him. The NC leader wore just a *topi*, but his rhetorical reference to the history and battles of his party, pointing his finger towards the sky, left no doubts about his identity. When the UN mission knocked at his door, waking him up all of a sudden, the figure of GP Koirala emerged clearly. In fact, because of his old age and sickness, at that time he was spending more time in bed than at the Parliament. The Maoist duo was also faithfully exposed through dark glasses and simple, resolute speaking manners. Similarly, the UML rhetoric was unmistakable to the spectators. And as soon as the audience recognized the characters portrayed, they burst into laughter and clapped.

But laughter brought also the realization of the drama of power. If the theatrical forms of protest described in section 5 created a new environment through performative acts that legitimised it, for example by renaming places, or through reversing rituals of power to desecrate power itself, Aarohan's last play evoked the transparencies of power. Without ever mentioning the names of the leaders or the parties, through action and rhetoric actors fleshed them out in such a way that what was evident on stage was their x-ray representation. Rather than stating, actors evoked what was behind the public appearance, leaving no easy solution to the audience, except for the warning of being alert and 'participant'.

Aarohan's plays were the product of the collective work of the actors and were built through meetings and rehearsals carried out beyond their daily work schedules. Such performances were the result of the actors' 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990:66), of their attempts to see and express the gaps and ironies of everyday life, without any interest-group specific design over the audience. For example, in the second sketch, I myself played the UN official with Saugat Malla who played the interpreter. During the construction of the play, I followed Saugat's lead in caricaturizing of the UN mission, admiring the wonderful landscape, and posing for the photographer, thus emphasizing the imagistic and tourist aspects of the visit. Rajan Kathiwara, the photographer, through rhythmic sounds and dance-like movements led the UN officials to meet the first politician at the corner of the stage. His 'Comma, comma' mixed 'Welcome and come on', but mainly provided a rhythmic base. Throughout the tour of the politicians, Saugat and I maintained the mocking rhythm improvised by Rajan which ended up characterizing the UN officers. A few weeks after the play, in an area near Thamel, an

adolescent girl selling Tibetan bags called me. She remembered I had acted in Basantapur Square. When I asked her what she liked in the play, she mentioned two moments. First, the vigilante recruitment which she mimed by punching into the air, and also the foreigners. She thus showed me how *bideshi* (foreigners) walk and mimed the hip movement. It was only then that I realized that what we started as a caricature, without willingly searching for 'foreign' elements, were later recognized by the audience as 'foreigner'. During the rehearsals, in fact, we had never discussed how foreigners walk. It just came up 'naturally', following the rhythm. The girl in the audience filled the movements with her own experience, multiplying the original meaning. In contrast, actors deliberately manipulated cultural elements, such as the Hindu hymn 'Raghupati Raghav', which were promptly recognized by the audience. By changing the words, they reversed its meaning. Rather than praising the king, it turned into an open critique.

However aesthetically different, both plays are agit-prop, marked by visually clear characterization, emblematic props, simple costumes and storyline, traditional elements, character types familiar to the spectators and ideological resonance with the context in which they are performed (Cohen-Cruz 1998:13-14; Kershaw 1992:80). Most importantly, in agit-prop the 'actors must believe that they know a solution to a compelling social problem and be prepared to take the same steps that they are urging upon the audience' (Cohen-Cruz 1998:14). In the first play, the message was clear and actors themselves participated in the popular movement like the audience. However, in the second, whilst not having a clear solution themselves, they reflected upon the messy political scenario and continued their vigilance, urging the audience to do the same. Yet, by publicly defying the authorities, actors took serious personal risks, as I will describe below.

5.2. Theatre from the heart

Performing during public meetings organized by civil society or artists' groups was dangerous both during the summer 2005 and after the People's Movement. In this section, I will introduce the life experiences of Kamal, Rajan and Bhola, all from Aarohan Theatre, to understand how some actors interpreted the connection between theatre and politics, what motivated them to actively participate and take personal risks. Kamal explains:

Theatre and politics go together. Theatre affects politics. Politics affects theatre. Sometimes whatever is performed in theatre helps to highlight politics... In drama there is also politics, if there is no politics there is no drama. That's why they are synonyms. Without drama there is no politics, without politics there is no drama. (Interview, October 2006)

Yet, on a practical level, drama seems to outdo the dualism between appearance and reality. In fact, theatre has real, deeply felt emotional, and affective power. Kamal, for example, tells that at the beginning of his career he thought that drama could not make any difference in society. Yet, after performing many shows in different locations such as schools, villages, streets, he realized that when people see a drama they become very aggressive, they cannot keep quiet: 'They want to speak', he remarks, 'and whatever they speak, they speak from their heart after seeing drama'. It's very important to reflect on the emotional and affective involvement that theatre very often triggers. Kamal continues explaining that when they perform in the streets, the audience sides with the oppressed and attacks the oppressor. At times, people really believe that the actor is the oppressor and beat him up. This is the reason why he thinks that theatre works. Seen from a different point of view, such cases of intense emotional involvement are often 'rationalized'. An audience that is 'over-affected' by the performance is regarded as simple, naïve, or labelled as an 'illiterate from the villages' (see Chapter two).

Emotions, subdued to rationality, should allow the spectator to get involved, but not too much, maintaining a safe distance from the performance. Both social and political science have trouble in incorporating emotions in analysis of politics and social protest (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001). Is this just a projection of a sort of Western-based rationality coupled with control biases that do not accept a spontaneous performative flow? Emotions are recurrent in actors' narratives as they are in Maoist artists' ones (Mottin 2010).

For Kamal it is this emotional and affective power that explains the success of political theatre, not theatre in support of politics but theatre that exposes the dark sides of politics, as he is keen to clarify. For Kamal, theatrical performances help the spectators reach deep inside their 'hearts' and get involved through singing and clapping:

Like when we performed the play in Baneshwor, or in front of Singha Durbar, or we take up political issues, whenever the issue comes into the play, the audience starts hooting, clapping and chanting slogans. It touches the people's heart and they see in the play what they were suffering. That's why drama gives them a kind of power. Because of that power, they are able to hold their hands up and chant slogans. In that way drama really works for political issues. (Ibid.)

Kamal also supported his thesis by adding that when they performed demonstrations and showed the oppressions carried out by police on the stage, he noticed that the real policemen standing near the stage were feeling very uncomfortable. Their power was being questioned. Bhola draws feelings into the discussion as well. He characterizes the political drama they performed for democracy as 'drama from our heart', as it had the objective of making people aware and bringing out their inner voice, in a

kind of heart-to-heart communication. And 'when people are aware, anything can happen', adds Kamal:

That's why to make people active theatre works as fire, to activate them. That's why we started to do political theatre.... to activate the people, not to let them remain passive, in silence. We are making pressure from below to tell them not to stay in silence. Theatre can only make pressure. Theatre doesn't change anything, theatre make pressure so people change from below. Earlier we gave pressure but nothing happened. Now people know that if they do, then anything can happen. If we keep pressuring them, they will not keep quiet and politicians will be afraid that if people raise their voices, they will not be there again. Where will we go? (Ibid.)

Yet, theatrical experience not only elicits emotions that are real and intense. The outcomes of actions 'fictitiously' performed on stage are also real, deeply felt, fearsome and feared. Actors themselves were afraid of possible attacks by the king's *goondas*. While leading the audience into a world of imagination, actors are strongly grounded on reality. Personal experiences, in fact, determined the ways in which actors engaged in political performances. Kamal, Bhola and Rajan, for example, were into student politics before joining Aarohan, or had relatives who were politicians in their villages. Such experience allowed them to have an informed understanding of the political situation and a keen interest that allowed them to draft skits. However, they were also well aware of the implications hidden in any public political performance. The last play that I describe is emblematic in this sense. At the last rehearsal inside the hall in Gurukul, just before moving to Basantapur Square, comic elements were dominant. Kamal is the main character actor in the group and his caricatures of both the vigilante recruiter and the TV announcer were precise and exhilarating. Yet, on the stage in Basantapur, in a domino-like effect, all the actors reduced both the number of lines and the broad gestures rehearsed earlier. For some actors this was a conscious decision. For me, playing both the American ambassador and one of the UN officers, it was an unexpected and startling surprise, as my dialogue was supposed to come soon after Kamal's. Yet, when he cut his harshest parody short, I was startled, and reduced my dialogue as well. Somehow the others did the same. Later on, Kamal explained that what I had sensed as an unexplainable mistake was in fact intentional. He was scared of being beaten by the king's people and told about his previous experiences. He had been beaten because of his active involvement in politics:

I felt afraid. Politics is really a big issue and in this big issue we feel afraid, maybe somebody beat us. Like last time we did [the play], we used the word 'vigilante', I thought that I shouldn't say and do more than that. Maybe outside the play somebody [may] beat me. I feared this. We are talking to do this drama in our *kachahari*, and yesterday I said to my friends 'let's put a small part, not big, because we have to do it in many places'.

I feared that going to many places there may be many reactionaries, from the king's people. Any time we could be attacked. Because we did our social drama on their issue when they hear the word 'hee, hee' they understand that we are against them. That's why they can beat us any time, or they can do anything. That's why I wanted to make that part small. This fear is always there (Ibid.).

I could see once again the limitations of doing participant observation, the difference between 'I' and 'them'. I was acting, fully 'participating' in anthropological terms. I was even 'over-participating', totally taken over by the play, concentrating on the performance, thrilled by the thousands of people sitting on the stairs of the temples in Basantapur square, excited by the topic that we were challenging through the play. Conversely, Kamal and other actors were conscious of the dangers that I could not see. Our perceptions of danger were different, just like the potential of real danger because my identity of a 'real' foreigner granted me more security. Nonetheless, the audience and the CMDP organizers enjoyed the play thoroughly, nobody realized what was lost or why. Paradoxically, only by 'participating', could I realize the limits of my 'participation'. At the same time, my 'fake participation' enhanced my understanding of the situation.

Personal experience thus provides ground for interest in political drama. Kamal explains that both his father and his uncle were politicians in his village. Through personal experience he also learnt the tricks of playing the roles of the political leaders, with maximum detail:

Since I was a child I went to demonstrations, public assemblies, rallies and from them I had something in my mind about politics. When I finished school and started college, I did politics in college. I engaged in student union elections. In Baneshwor Campus, I won also, and I worked in the unions for 2 years. Then I came to the theatre and left politics. Otherwise, I used to do politics. That's why I have knowledge of politics that I use in drama in different places, how they speak, how they walk. I also experienced, while doing politics, how the problems come to you. I experienced a little. That's why I also enjoy working [in theatre] about politics. When I worked in the union, I saved myself many times by running. Otherwise, I would have been beaten. What happened [once] was I won in the union [elections]. My friends insisted in celebrating the victory with beer but when I denied they ran after me with knives. I kept running till I reached Maiti Devi. For 3 months I didn't go to college. There was another friend, who won the elections. We were in the union office. Other people broke my friend's nose. That's why I like doing political drama (Ibid.).

Bhola started performing in political plays in his village. He remembers that before 1990 there were more plays for democracy than for entertainment. Many groups organized cultural programmes including songs, dances and dramas. He loved watching them and started acting when he was 12, soon after 1990. His uncle was a big party leader. They wrote and performed plays especially for festivals, 'everybody who were interested played' he says, 'old and young':

Once our uncle did one play in a place named Mawaldap. I also sang the song *Simali chaya ma basi* (Sitting in the shadow of the simali) with my uncle. In that play, there was one landlord who cheated the people from the village. We were doing the play and during the play people who didn't like democracy threw stones and made us run away. Before acting I sang. I was studying in class 5-6 [13-14 years]. My uncle acted, sung those songs, and there were many incidents like this. After democracy [1990] also, I did such plays. Before coming to Gurukul, I also did political theatre. I did little of this and then I started to work on social issues (Interview, December 2005).

If for many actors getting involved in political theatre was just continuing a personal process initiated well before, for others it was the result of the new enthusiasm for politics that grew after Emergency 2005. Many of the actresses in Gurukul, except for Nisha, played political theatre for the first time in 2005 and got immediately caught up. While telling me about the demonstrations, Pashupati admits that she sometimes asked herself if what they had lived in those days really happened, it was so unbelievable. Aarohan's director allowed total freedom to the actors. Their participation in political theatre was their own personal choice and was faced in different ways by different actors. Many actors talked about social responsibility to explain their choices, as Bhola explains:

We are also people of this country, we have also responsibility towards our nation, for that responsibility we do it. We do drama from our heart, doing political theatre is our responsibility (Interview, September 2006)

Rajan mentions the pride of being on stage and acting for something they personally believe in, with self-awareness and responsibility being their leading motivation. This is how he felt soon after playing the vigilantes role in Basantapur:

...the big mass. Really, I felt very proud. Thousands of people were there and they were clapping. And when they heard touchy words and got good expressions from actors, they were clapping and were excited. Oh, really, I felt joy inside. And I felt proud of myself. After finishing the performance, we were walking and people wanted to touch me. They were looking deeply and that time I felt, 'ok, am I an important person?' I questioned myself. People are looking at me, and suddenly I thought 'what is my position? What is my expression? Am I doing a good expression or not?' There was a kind of awareness in my mind. That day I was walking in a different style. I was walking in the street and energy came to my body and I was feeling very strong. And I was thinking if I'm an important person in society I should be careful on how to walk, even while walking, as society is looking at me, there should be good people [I should be a good person] (Interview, August 2006)

If taking part in a big mass event is energizing, playing for thousands of people sharing the same cause is, as Rajan suggested, an explosive event for actors embodying the double identity of social and dramatic actors within the doubly heightened situation of a dramatic performance within a protest

program. The fear mentioned by Kamal coexisted with its opposite, that is, the pride talked about by Rajan, in a kaleidoscope of emotions. Yet, Aarohan's performances questioned first and foremost the actors themselves, who composed the performances and acted. Rajan feels the urgency of self-questioning and reflection that links the personal to the political, social and professional, the need to fill the gap created by the desire dramatized on stage:

If I'm going to do some demonstrations against the government for democracy, we should be in democracy first and after that we could go there. Sometimes there could be personal problems and maybe another society blocks the people to go forwards. We need to fight about it, on both sides, personal and in society. [...] Maybe out of thousand ways theatre may be one. But first of all, I must be changed. Sometimes it's always speaking, and maybe, like now, we say 'ok, we need to do this, we need to do that, we need democracy', what is our attitude this time? what are our practical things? Theoretically, I'm speaking, but my practice may be different. First, we must see ourselves, 'am I on the right track or not?' Sometimes we may say you have to do this, through theatre. [But] there are different ways of conveying information, sometimes masses go the actors way, if you are talking and talking and talking and on the practical level you are not doing anything, it's very difficult. So the actors need to be really aware about this' (Interview, August 2006)

What Rajan advocates is a collapsing of what is publicly forwarded on the stage and everyday life practices off-stage, a correlation between inner and outer coherence (see Chapter five). Even Bhola highlights the importance of initiating change within oneself in order to transform the outer social reality and thus prevent dramas from being just idle chatter:

Now we can't do theatre to change the prime minister. It's not in our hands. But the situation is like this, so, we can say what is our role. If I change myself then only I can change you. If I don't change myself, I cannot tell you to change yourself. (Interview, September 2006).

But what is really in our hands? Is the personal really an easier starting point than the social or the political? Certainly, actors' reflexivity upon the country's political situation triggered personal reflections about their own lives, their group, freedom and democracy. I want to stop here for the moment, and develop the issue in chapter five, dealing with what it is like to be an actor in Nepal and the organization of Aarohan Theatre Group.

6. Conclusion

I have concluded now my trajectory that started from extraordinary social, public, macro events like the performance of authority through the control of the public space, moving to the theatricality of

street protests and plays expressing personal and shared ideals, hopes and better future worlds. The theatre's link to crisis and politics has been reasserted in Nepal by the recent turmoil and by actor's narratives. Symbolic action acquired central importance in negotiating power during political contestation.

The performance of kingship and the performance of dissent refer to a specific mode of communication which characterizes Nepal that I have already mentioned in chapter two. Burghart (1993; 1996) pointed out that in hierarchical societies, and I would add in 'hierarchical communication', the role of the speaker and that of the listener reproduce social hierarchy and are not based on equality. What characterizes the voice of authority is that his role permits him 'not to listen' to a speaker who is lower down in the hierarchy, and thus the speaker has not the 'moral' authority to be heard. In the case analysed in this chapter, the king prevented the people from gaining voice both by not listening and by silencing. Acts of street protest, and even the Maoist insurgency, started from serious acts of 'not being listened to' by decades of political and social oppression. More than a culture of 'silence', what emerges is a culture of 'silencing'. I linked the appearance of performative means of protest, 'high behaviour'/'twice behaved behaviour' (see Chapter one) to the lack of other possibilities of being heard, a behaviour that is itself reproduced hierarchically (see Chapter four). The theatricality of dissent contributed to creating a moral space for being heard, to transform the collective representations and motivate the social movement. The street was turned into an aesthetic space, through the focus of attention. And thus protestors could exercise agency by performing alternative representations of reality (Chapter one). The streets became a temporary heterotopic space of transformation where hierarchies were reversed, and demonstrators claimed the moral authority to speak and be listened to.

The theatrical metaphor is employed to describe the misaligned, the unexpected, the paradoxical, the mismatch between appearance and 'reality'. Theatrical performances, between sections 2 and 4 in the table 3.1., 'acted' out similar paradoxical situations. Symbolic inversions, irony, parody and paradox characterize radical popular theatre (van Erven 1988). They test and undermine the limits of dominant discourses of power, and challenge human understanding by crossing the boundaries of different categories. Political theatre exposed the gaps, the invisible mechanisms that 'do' power. Even irony carries the connotation of duplicity, and its 'dark and dissimulating side is apparent in its shared definition as saying the opposite of what is meant' (Fernandez and Taylor Huber 2001:5). The politics of irony, in fact, depends upon its indirection (Ibid.). The 'not-thing' of symbolic inversions and irony itself strikingly recalls the 'not-I' that characterizes dramatic roles (Schechner 1983) and that allows for the creation of an aesthetic space

(Chapter one). Contradictions and incongruous juxtapositions encouraged spectators to explore alternative viewpoints and incorporate new roles and ideas.

If both performative street protests and contentious theatrical performances create 'gaps', they also spur the audience's desire to imaginatively fill them. Desire is born of absence (Hastrup 2004:43) and theatrical performances provide those 'absences', those gaps that allow the audience to feel the need and desire to overcome them. These 'gaps' function in different ways. On the one hand, the political situation is exposed by staging the 'invisible' that sustains power. On the other, the audience's mood is raised slightly above their present condition. The hopefulness conveyed on stage translates into an experience of real hope, creating valid fantasies and powerful desires (Dolan 2005:5). Thirdly, performances create potential, desire provides the energy for real social action (Dolan 2005). Desire thus becomes a 'dramaturgical force' (Margolin cited in Dolan 2005:56).

Thus the aesthetic space may become a space 'between and betwixt' (Turner 1982), a space of participation and transformation. The philosopher Herbert Marcuse stated that 'art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and the women who could change the world' (Marcuse cited in Dolan 2005:20). Art can also invoke 'an image of the end of power, the appearance of freedom. But this is only the appearance; clearly, the fulfilment of this promise is not within the domain of art' (Ibid.). Yet, the experience of a performance leaves behind intellectual, spiritual, and affective traces that can incite the audience into action outside the magical space of the performance (Dolan 2005). Citing Bergson's essay 'Laughter' (1899), Babcock suggests that such 'topsy-turvydom' (1989:118), is 'an attack on control, on closed systems' which reinforce the idea that reality cannot be altered or reversed (Babcock *ibid.*). Laughter, paradoxes, masked tricks and comic effects threaten the rigidity of dominant paradigms, making change easier to accept and more enjoyable. Rituals were reversed to anticipate and spur political change. Theatre added to the suggestions and ambiguities offered by ritual manipulations producing deep emotional involvement and bonds of solidarity without requiring consensus or uniformity of belief (Kertzer 1988:67). Moreover, symbolic actions contribute to the transformation of collective representations which motivate social movements. Symbolic action and inversion allow for 'mimetic equalization of power relationships that connect spiritual power to secular political power' (Taussig cited in Whitten 2003).

It is a game of make-believe. And make-believe appears as making, not faking, *poieis* not *mimesis* (Schechner 1993). Political struggle becomes a struggle of representation. The battle on representation draws attention to the processes of representation that go on, in politics, in theatre and in ethnography alike, and oblige one to face the threat that comes from making the process explicit (cf. Mosse 2005). The ways in which people sustain representations beyond reality are central

to their source of power. Rather than changing 'reality' itself, energy is utilized and directed towards maintaining representations of reality (Ibid.).

Moving then towards the personal, micro-level experience, I have considered actors' experience of performing political street drama during liminal political periods. I have started to take into account how actors' reflections on the political situation translated into analysis of their personal lives (more in Chapter four). As there are as many trajectories as there are participants, I have chosen to focus on the narratives of actors, in the attempt to show social creativity at work both on and off stage. Neuro-science 'mirror theories' (Rizzolati, Sinigaglia, Anderson 2007) suggest that refractions of actors' experiences have certainly been shared by the thousands of spectators who were present at the plays, integrating life experiences in personal, unpredictable and heterogeneous ways.

Emotions have emerged as essential tools to understand performances within social movements, no less important than symbols and imagination, and complementing 'power' and 'space' as analytical tools (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001). Is the spectator's physical participation in a theatrical performance, like in Forum Theatre, necessary to call a performance 'participatory'? Or is deep emotional participation similarly powerful? We should not fall in oversimplifications and argue that being part of a seated audience is a merely passive activity: the exercise of imagination, critical sense and sensitivity are indeed productive and creative activities (Bennet 1997). Very much depends on the theatrical relationship that is established with the audience, as I will detail in chapter four and six. The context in which the performance takes place also matters. Moss 'argues that festivals cannot be "artificially created as part of the effort to unite the people behind their leaders"', and he cites the demise of the revolutionary festivals with the demise of the revolution to support his claim' (cited in Kertzer 1988:159). Political theatre performances were powerful because they were in an existing social movement. This issue will be picked up again in the next chapter while discussing *kachahari natak* in the development context and Maoist cultural performances. The next chapter will also elucidate the link between political theatre and theatre for development, moving from political to social critique.

DOING KACHAHARI NATAK IN KATHMANDU

The ways in which power, politics and theatre intersect have been discussed in the previous chapters. Political power creates powerful but 'real' illusions to sustain itself. Theatre and the 'theatrical mode' may undo the inconsistencies of political power and challenge it by revealing its gaps. But the reverse is also true. Theatre and cultural performances can objectify identity claims and strengthen ideological belongings, as in the case of Maoist performances (Mottin 2010). As a result, stage representations appear as thick, contested and simultaneously grounded illusions/allusions, closer to 'reality' than the strategic performances of everyday life and politics. Because of the intentionality of its production, the world of 'make-believe' takes real and material forms. But it is the declared and assumed theatricality and illusion of the performance that creates a space for the 'rehearsal' of unpleasant or unwanted social truths. They can, if necessary, be dismissed as 'theatre'. Theatre and its playfulness, its irony, destabilize fixed notions of 'truth', and calls up every spectator to identify what is 'real' and what is not.

In this chapter I will focus on how theatre, namely *kachahari natak*, can represent and question social issues. In particular, I will try to unpack the practices involved in doing *kachahari natak* in Kathmandu. After exploring how Boal's format of Forum Theatre was adapted into the Nepali form of *kachahari natak*, I will detail the process of its standardisation as another form of development drama. What becomes clear is that creativity is 'regulated' to fit both planned and organizational development, the 'special' of theatre is moulded into the 'normal' of daily working practices. But first,

I will explain how the world of street theatre described in Chapter two entered development in the 1980s. In particular, I will use actors' narratives to describe Aarohan's urge to get involved in theatre and development. I will then introduce Maoist cultural programmes as another form of cultural activity aiming at bringing about social change, but with a different rationale.

The context through which a theatre group works in Nepal is still at present conditioned by several factors. A powerful narrative of lack governs artists' descriptions of the theatrical scene: the lack of state policies regarding the arts, the lack of a developed stage theatre circuit and culture, the lack of financial sustainability, a lack of training facilities, an unstable political situation, dependence on development work shaped by development agencies' practices, an on-going process of theatre professionalism which restricts actors' possibilities of developing their careers across different groups, and a centralization of professional theatrical activities in the capital, Kathmandu. Yet, Nepali theatrical activities today are also sustained by the cultural diversity and richness of the country. They are challenged by the transitional historical moment, which is full of uncertainties but also of opportunities. And they are also fuelled by the passionate dedication of an increasing number of theatre artists and followers. Let us continue the historical ethnography begun in Chapter two, and move to the moment in which the political theatre of the 1980s met the expanding world of NGOs and planned development.

1. Theatre in development: a background

In contrast to many African countries, where theatre for development started from the drama departments of universities (Harding 1999; Mda 1993), in Nepal it developed directly in the artistic proscenium theatre and political street theatre (Chapter two and three). In other words, the forerunners who used theatre in development projects in the 1980s are the same theatre groups who developed modern Nepali theatre over the last 25 years. My account reflects an actors' point of view. It is based on interviews and informal conversations rather than the analysis of past development project papers. My position — all in all I was an outsider (see Chapter one), not an 'internal' NGO worker — did not allow me to have access to full project documentation. My requests to various theatre group directors for access to past project reports, in order to understand possible shifts in discourse, changes in policy or financial support, were partly ignored and partly dismissed with the justification that such documentation had been lost. However, while that would have helped present a larger picture, my purpose is to explore the theatrical substance of Nepali theatre, which relies almost

exclusively on interrogating theatre internally, by analysing the theatrical voice as it is espoused by the actors themselves. The financial side of project work emerged as a sensitive issue and I could not access it.

In the late 1980s, sporadic projects using theatre to disseminate information about health issues were first introduced in Nepal. However, it was only after the emergence of multiparty democracy in 1990, when the ban on the right to organize was lifted, and when the number of INGOs-NGOs increased exponentially (Heaton Shrestha 2001:69), that theatre began to be used more extensively in development projects. Before Nepal was 'opened' to the world in 1950, travel narratives had stereotypically represented Nepal as a Shangri-la that existed outside of time. After it was 'opened' to the 'world', it was, again stereotypically, portrayed as being remote, isolated and, thus, in need of development (Pigg 1992; 1993). As Pigg (1992) observes, 'development' also had a moral connotation, defining the positive pole in a series of dichotomies that moulded society and identities: *bikasit* (developed) vs. *abikasit* (backward), modern vs. traditional, foreign vs. local, city vs. village, developer vs. under-developed, wealthy vs. poor (Ibid). Most rural Nepalis were homogeneously conceptualized as illiterate, simple and underdeveloped. As a result, theatre soon became a privileged tool for development communication (Mda 1993).¹¹³ This link between a paternalistic development establishment imbued with a dichotomous modernity-tradition cosmology applied to a 'civilizing' purpose and theatre as one of its amplifying instrumentalities had a somewhat infectious negative consequence. Many actors, in their ruminations on Nepali theatre, tend to see themselves and Nepali theatre as being underdeveloped and in need of help and assistance.

Artists and development specialists alike talk in passionate terms about the beginning of applied theatre in Nepal. At that time, theatre groups were not permanent institutions with full-time 'professional' actors. Artists were engaged in other jobs for a living and met when they could for rehearsal. Sunil Pokharel recalls that soon after 1990, artists from his group got together for a project and set off on a tour to different districts, performing a play on community development. They travelled with a small light, some costumes, a generator and a few props. The group performed skits exploring the concept of 'development' itself. These plays sought to communicate the idea that development is a mentality and should not be associated with physical infrastructure but with a change in people's attitude. This was the early purpose of development theatre in Nepal, to propagate and disseminate 'development ideologies' through theatre.

The establishment of multi-party politics in 1990 represented a big challenge for Nepali theatre workers. Many theatre groups formed during the Panchayat time had a strong political, anti-

¹¹³ For literature on theatre and development communication see Epskamp 2006, Mda 1993.

establishment and pro-democracy identity. Artists argue that once the objective of democracy was fulfilled, Nepali theatre entered a period of crisis. Such crises of theatre following the overthrow of authoritarian regime have occurred in other countries as well. For example, Romanian actor and director, Ion Caramitru has argued that during the communist era, theatre was a stronghold of moral and artistic resistance. After the collapse of Ceausescu regime in 1989, theatre lost its audience and actors had to work hard to rebuild the whole structure with the help of philosophers and artists who returned to Romania after years of exile (Caramitru 1996:58-66). The crisis, however, lasted only a couple of years, shorter than Nepal's theatrical crisis, as perceived by the actors I interviewed.

Artists' opinions about the 'decline' of theatre in the country after 1990 vary. Some believe the introduction of new electronic media such as television and cinema shifted a large part of the audience away from the theatre halls. Anil Pokharel, a theatre and TV serial actor, explains that TV is more easily accessible to viewers than theatre. Audiences can watch tele-serials and films at home without having to travel. Watching television – as well as acting in tele serials - was also a source of social status and its popularity spread rapidly (cf. Liechty 2002). The new media lured some theatre actors as well. As a result, the decline in theatre practice is partly explained in terms of a decrease in the availability of artistic personnel. New media provided glamour. Easy popularity and recognition attracted actors. In contrast, drama was still stigmatized and considered the preserve of 'people who don't have work' (see Chapter five). Inevitably, the 'lower' status assigned to theatre artists in comparison to film or TV actors, played a part in the decreased interest in theatre as a profession. Other artists, however, believe that the audience alone cannot solely be blamed for the decline of theatre. Instead, they attribute waning audience interest to a decline in the quality of the stage drama on offer.

Sunil Pokharel, on the other hand, locates the reasons for theatre's decline elsewhere. He talks about a deep aesthetic and identity crisis that affected the whole political theatre movement once the goal of political struggle (ie. struggles for democracy) was seemingly achieved, a crisis that coincided with the expansion of NGOs and INGOs soon after 1990:

[street theatre before 1990] was totally political. It was [performed] because of the spirit and the political thought. We were not asking for any money from anyone. It was totally our commitment, the theatre of people's commitment towards democracy. Then when the NGOs entered the scenario, after '90, street theatre of Nepal, all the street theatre movement went to the NGOs hands and it lost the spirit, and it was totally [reduced to] the money-making of propaganda theatre, it was also propaganda theatre at the beginning but with [a] different spirit. (Interviewed in English, March 17th, 2005)

Donor involvement in theatre is still a sensitive issue. Theatre groups rely on project work for their survival. At the same time, as Abbing (2002) notes with regard to Western art, the marriage between art and economics is an uncomfortable one. Sunil Pokharel explains, 'afterwards it was [an] easy money making thing too. There was a lot of street theatre, and we forgot the aesthetic of theatre. Somehow it was more speech and speech and speech and theatre people lost their..., in a way not ethics, but way. In a way the funder, who gives the money, decided the content. They gave you the message and you just need to deliver it.' [Ibid.]. For some time, Sunil feels, theatre groups lost their 'agency', becoming somehow the means by which other people's messages were communicated. Sunil Pokharel continues, artists 'totally lost the theatrical language, the aesthetics of the theatre and so at one stage when people heard about street theatre, they thought OK, it's something about the toilet or something about.... something we don't need to see' (Ibid.).

Many theatre groups grew in association with development campaigns, usually starting from Kathmandu and moving out to the periphery. Actors' tales of those adventurous trips are fascinating. Because in rural areas the possibilities of entertainment were limited, in these artists' representations the troupes were always welcomed with great enthusiasm; gathering an audience was easy (see Chapter two). In fact, theatre had the double function of delivering the 'development message'¹¹⁴ and entertaining the spectators. The working schedules were tight. For example, Aruna Karki, from Aarohan Theatre Group, performed in street plays in East Nepal for two years in the mid-1990s. The team was composed of 10 artists, playing between 60-90 performances a month, 2-3 per day. They walked from village to village on foot and earned an average of NRs 150 per show.¹¹⁵

The late 1990s, however, was also a time of methodological experimentation. Theatre groups tried out different dramatic techniques to merge 'commitment' to the art and cause, and financial survival. For example, Aarohan Theatre replaced long tours across faraway districts with theatre training courses for local partner groups. This was advantageous because local groups had a deeper awareness of the local socio-political situation as well as the ability to use specific idioms, manners and language. Plays were, thus, more topical, costs were reduced and resources were managed at a community level. Nonetheless, according to many artists, the aesthetic quality of street dramas decreased, and was often replaced by long morality tales and speeches.

Artists' representations of the relationship and impact of donors funding on Nepali theatre are varied and contrasting. At one extreme, some would refer to NGO finance as a 'sweet poison';¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ I use the general term 'development message' to indicate various issues like family planning, sanitation, drinking water, environmental protection that often constituted the topic of street plays.

¹¹⁵ Artists kept NRs 100 for themselves and left NRs. 50 to develop the village club the group belonged to.

¹¹⁶ Heaton Shrestha reports similar metaphors: donor's money is likened to heroin, *aphim khayō* (it has eaten opium) (2006:28).

at the other as a *badhyata*, or compulsion. The relationship with donors and foreign funding is certainly a heartfelt theme that triggers heated debates. 'NGO theatre' has become a genre in itself in Nepal, as well as a source of contention. Nobody wants to be labelled as a group doing 'NGO theatre', alternatively known as *bikase natak/bikase kam* (development theatre/work), *propaganda natak* or *pracharbadi natak* (advertisement theatre) (Ghimire 2007). Yet, all theatre groups in Nepal depend upon foreign funding for survival. The stigma goes beyond the wider crisis affecting the development industry (Heaton Shrestha 2001:18; Dixit 1997; De Chenes 1996). Street theatre, in fact, was still considered a 'low' form of drama by some 'intellectuals' when I started my fieldwork. In a recent book on Nepali theatre, Abhi Subedi (2006) has contrasted street theatre with what he defines as 'serious theatre', meaning proscenium theatre. There still seems to be a hierarchy of artistic forms, where text-based theatre and literature are considered 'superior' to oral, improvisation-based, or street – performed ones. Even acting in cinema and TV shows is commonly regarded as more prestigious than theatre because these professions offer more lucrative incomes. The definition seems to indicate a high-caste cultural hegemony, since most oral performances traditionally were the realm of lower castes (see Chapter five). Financial remuneration and fame also plays an important role in marking the status of dramatic genres

Although it is not possible to generalize across theatre groups or the ways in which donors fund theatre projects, in the last few years some artists have started to consciously struggle to differentiate 'street theatre' or development theatre from 'NGO theatre'. Aarohan's turn towards *kachahari natak* constitutes one of these attempts.

2. Devi's dreams

An open ground near the Ring Road. Some actors sing folk songs.

Lured by the rhythm of the *madal*, some people stop. Actors and audience connect. The familiarity of the songs creates an atmosphere which promotes a friendly rapport. An aesthetic space is being constructed. Children find place in the inner part of the circle surrounding the performance area, a diameter of 6-8 metres. Passers-by stop to look. Some sing along with the actors, others smile. Some get into the spirit of things and begin to dance. These are usually loitering drunks. More and more people find a place around the circle that will host the play. By the end of the second song, a

reasonable crowd has formed and is ready to watch the show. The *sutradhar* (facilitator/narrator)¹¹⁷ introduces the theatre group and explains the 'rules' of *kachahari natak*. Then all the actors gather at the centre of the space. Bent forward, arms on the shoulders of their companions, the actors form a close circle to amplify the sound of the opening song that introduces the Devi's story:

Aama malai pathaauna padhnalai

Na roka hai agaadi badhnalai

Mother send me to study

Don't stop me from going ahead

An ordinary family lives in a remote area. Devi studies in class 3. Her father's call interrupts her game in the courtyard. He is ready to leave to go to the capital. Because of political conflict, life in the country is hard and schools are frequently closed. Through the help of a relative, a broker, Devi's father brings the girl to the house of a rich family in Kathmandu. She is expected to help with the family chores and continue her studies in her free time. The father will work in a brick factory nearby. Despite promises to the contrary, Devi is given too much work and never has the opportunity to go to school. Physical and psychological violence are also part of her daily regimen. Day after day Devi becomes bitter and sad as she sees the landlord's son going to school. One day she finds the courage to ask the landlady permission to go to school. The lady denies, and continues oppressing her. The play is stopped and the *sutradhar* asks the audience: 'In this situation, what can the little girl do?'



Fig. 22. Crowd gathered around a *kachahari* performance in Balaju Market, Kathmandu

¹¹⁷ The role of the *sutradhar* appears both in top-down street theatre and in *kachahari* theatre: in the first the character is close to a narrator that comments upon the story, in *kachahari*, the *sutradhar* becomes a 'facilitator' who attempt to activate the spectators.

This is a tableau that characterized the beginning of the dozens of street plays performed by Aarohan around Kathmandu during the period of my fieldwork. I will outline the process of creation and performance of a *kachahari* play in section four of this chapter. Devi's story will serve as a case study to reflect on the critical issues concerning the selection of the topic, the relationship between audience and actors, audience participation, and the follow-up of theatrical activities. For the moment, let me concentrate on the invention of that *kachahari* tradition in Nepal.

3. Kachahari natak

Aarohan Theatre Group turned to *kachahari natak* in the attempt to move away from what they perceived as top-down forms of street theatre. *Kachahari natak* was systematically introduced into Aarohan's activities with the establishment of Gurukul, thus marking an important turning point in their street theatre practice. The practical experience of Aarohan's senior actors in the 1990s made them realize that travelling out of the capital to perform street theatre was not a beneficial methodology because of the problematic relationship between city-based artists and local communities. The topicality of the content, audience participation and the local 'flavour' of the performance were key elements determining whether or not a play was successful. Basanta Bhatta, from Aarohan Theatre, explains how sometimes solutions to problems as suggested by street plays needed to be 'tuned' to the location. He gives an example of a development issue, 'sanitation', discussed through a street play showing the necessity of boiling water. But 'what if a community is so poor as not to have the kerosene to boil water? Why not think about cleaning the water canal instead?' remarks Basanta, pointing at the mismatch between lived reality and its representation in street plays. Aarohan Theatre dealt with these problems by changing their strategy. First, they started training local groups instead of performing themselves out of Valley. Secondly, they experimented with a more participatory theatre methodology, that is, Forum Theatre. The next subsection will show how the global methodology of the theatre of the oppressed (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1994; Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 2006) has been locally adopted and then adapted into *kachahari natak*. The continuities with the 'original' form as well as the variations introduced in the Nepali context will be considered.

3.1. Nepalizing Forum Theatre

Sunil Pokharel recollects the first forum theatre workshop in Nepal¹¹⁸ as a tale of risk and courage (Nepathya n.6, 2004). In 2001, a Danish NGO, MS Nepal contacted Sunil Pokharel to discuss theatre. The annual slogan for MS Nepal's head-office was 'Peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation'; the Nepali office wanted to organize a project on this theme.¹¹⁹ Sunil met Tim Whyte, a Danish adviser in Dang, who asked Sunil for help in preparing some 'theatre for conflict resolution' activities. Because street theatre had been overused in Nepal, Tim Whyte suggested that Sunil employ forum theatre instead. They planned a 10-day workshop in Banepa (Kavre) to train 5 partner groups that would perform in their own areas. A few days before the workshop, Sunil met Tim, assuming he would know how to perform forum theatre since he had suggested it. Sunil, in fact, had heard of it but was not familiar with the methodology. But Tim had no knowledge whatsoever about Forum Theatre and assumed that Sunil, as a theatre person, knew about it. The beginning of the workshop was approaching but no book about Forum Theatre was available in Kathmandu. A friend of Sunil found a two-page article written in English. Therefore, the first workshop on Forum Theatre he conducted was based on improvisation out of those two pages, but the form seemed to work well anyway. During the workshop Sushil Chaudhari, an actor from Bardhiya, suggested giving the technique a Nepali name: *kachahari* (Ibid.). In Nepali *kachahari* indicates a traditional court where village leaders gathered to hear and resolve conflicts in their own community (cf. Upreti 2008).

But the adoption of a Nepali name introduced a particular kind mode of conflict resolution. I understood the specific connotation of a '*kachahari* solution' only when I came across a 'real' problem. In 2005 I was in a village near Biratnagar, as a guest of relatives of Aruna and Mani Pokharel, both actors in Aarohan Theatre Group. Mani told me that his uncle's cow had been stolen. Therefore a group of villagers were going to hold a *kachahari*. Mani explained that they were almost sure about the identity of the thief but if they had gone to the police, the man would have simply been arrested and released after few days. The villagers were not interested in punishing that man. What they wanted was to have the cow returned. The solution sought by the *kachahari* meeting was therefore a very 'practical' one, focusing more on serving the interest of the 'oppressed' rather than punishing the 'oppressor', through using the community's capabilities and knowledge. *Kachahari* meetings are still held in rural areas of Nepal. Even though in the capital many people may not have

¹¹⁸ Other informants told me about a Forum Theatre workshop organized by the British Council around the year 2000 but I could not track down more information.

¹¹⁹ In MS publicity material *kachahari* is also referred to as 'conflict theatre' but during the period of my fieldwork this definition was not in use.

had real life experience of a village *kachahari*, according to the actors most understand what it is about. *Kachahari* is conceived as a 'traditional, national institution' (Rajkumar, interviewed in English, December 2004), neither caste nor region specific. 'It is our long tradition in Nepal', explains Rajkumar, one of the Gurukul founding actors.

Anil Pokharel, one of Aarohan's senior actors, visualizes the difference between street theatre and *kachahari natak* through a powerful metaphor. He recounts that when the actors perform street plays, they go with a head full of things and come back empty. They 'discharge' their 'knowledge' to the audience. The image suggests a one-way flow, a monological form of communication (cf. Freire 2004; Boal 1998). Conversely, when they perform *kachahari* theatre, they 'go with an empty head and come back full' (Interview, December 2005). This statement highlights two key moments in the process of performing a *kachahari* play: the lack of preconceptions preceding the construction of a performance and the quality of information produced by the performance itself.¹²⁰ The flow of information is the very opposite of that which occurs in street plays. In the case of *kachahari*, information is not 'delivered' by the specialists but 'comes out' from the audience unlike development theatre which has a more overtly pedagogic function, visualised as the transmission of knowledge from the more informed to the less informed, packaged as socially necessary messages.¹²¹ What emerges from confronting the two forms is a different theory of mind. Street theatre is backed by the assumption that the audience lacks knowledge and needs to be fed with information from 'outside'. Street theatre as a form of 'Behaviour Change Communication' is thus legitimized and the practice fits well into the ideology of development that reads reality in terms of lack (Pigg 1993). On the contrary, *kachahari* theatre is based on the assumption that the audience may have ideas on how to solve their problems. Theatre is used to facilitate the dialogue within the audience and is a form of rehearsal and reflection on different possible solutions.

To sum up, while the Theatre of the Oppressed has now become a global technique of staging power relations, in Nepal it has found a particular local character which is not defined through the revival or the adaptation of pre-existing traditional artistic performances. What is referred to and reinvented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) is a pre-existing form of local government practice, of problem resolution. However, what is easily framed by theatre specialists is not so obvious to non-specialists. Theatre artists who are not familiar with the origin of the Theatre of the Oppressed perceive *kachahari* as a 'foreign form' (see Chapter one). One artist once explained to me that it has come from India, which is usually considered the main source of new theatrical practices entering

¹²⁰ What will happen to the knowledge produced during the performance will be discussed later.

¹²¹ The different flow of information reflects the difference between 'instruction' (from the Latin *in-struire*, meaning 'putting in') and 'education' (*e-ducere*, meaning 'taking out'). But where does the knowledge acquired in the performance go? Who benefits from it? Both issues will be taken into account later on in the description of the performance production.

Nepal. The audience recognizes the word in its original meaning, although many spectators do not practically distinguish *kachahari* from other forms of street theatre. However, such a 'nationalist' or pan-Nepal view of the *kachahari* meetings portrayed by Rajkumar cannot be accepted at face value without questioning its assumptions. Upreti (2008:152) locates *kachahari* meetings in the hills. Moreover, *kachahari* meetings may have inbuilt a power imbalance as only the village leaders took part in the meetings. As an arena for display and context of power, they may not be neutral arenas for debate in the Habermasian sense. How the 'rules' of the public space that govern the *kachahari* meetings translate into the aesthetic space of *kachahari natak* will be discussed in the case-studies outlined in the next sub-section.

3.2. Mainstreaming *kachahari natak*

As I mentioned in the introduction, conflict constitutes the heart of theatre (Boal 1998; Chapter one). Conflict was also the starting point of *kachahari natak*. Yet, establishing how to frame a conflict and, in particular, what kinds of conflicts to dramatize is a crucial issue, especially in a conflict-ridden country, and Nepal's conflicts have been many since the beginning of the People's War. Aarohan Theatre tried to use theatre in conflict transformation after a series of workshops organized by MS Nepal. An MS Nepal publication states that 'one of the ways to give room for positive conflict transformation is through theatre because it allows for conflicts to be analysed and explored on a 'neutral' ground, namely on stage' (AAVV, 2003:13). Through theatre, the booklet continues, conflicting parties can see their situations from different points of view and try various solutions, 'without necessarily having to agree with them or accommodate any consequences afterwards' (Ibid.). But can the street 'stage', as a public space, really be neutral? Under which circumstances can it be so? In fact, making public has often been understood as part of the process of ramification through which conflicts escalate (Breed 2009).¹²²

In this next section I will explain how the 'neutrality' of the stage may itself be a construction. In practice, what govern the performance space are the rules of the 'public space'. The second question is also rather controversial: is the audience really exempt from any consequence when the performance is over? This statement is based on the assumption that the aesthetic space created by the performance is totally detached from the everyday space of social interaction and that the

¹²² Breed (2009) observes that in post-genocide Rwanda, any form of public 'telling', including theatre, could lead to a public act of incrimination, turning the 'theatre of liberation' into a 'theatre for incrimination'

boundaries between the two are clear-cut. The aesthetic space is conceived as an apolitical space. Thirdly, community involvement and the possibility of personal action in similar real life situations are considered essential to participatory theatre (Ibid.). The neutrality of the aesthetic space, boundaries between life and theatre, ideas of 'community', and 'participation' are all issues which will be analysed and discussed in the next sections.

According to the MS Nepal booklet (Ibid.), a conflict can be analyzed according to a three concentric circles model.

	3	2	1
	PERSONAL SPHERE	LOCAL SPHERE	OUTER SPHERE
Example	Impact of the People's War on the personal lives of the people living in conflict areas	Impact of the People's War at village level	The People's War at political level (government-leaders)

Table 4.1. Conflict-analysis model.

The innermost circle represents the personal sphere closest to the individual. The second circle, level two, represents the local sphere, near the individual. There, the conflict is visible and approachable, although the underlying driving forces and structures may be hidden. The third level stands for the outer sphere, 'faceless, social, political, economic or cultural' issues people usually don't have direct access to'. The material suggested translating level-one conflicts into level-one or two in order to address them through a *kachahari* play (Ibid.).

In 2004, Aarohan actors had already excluded level-one conflicts from forum theatre. They were considered out of reach in theatrical terms. Although actors could explore the roots of those problems, they felt unable to address people in power. Therefore, they were not able to look for real life solutions or transformations. For example, the ideology of caste was considered a problem at level one. But the everyday forms of caste discrimination were regarded as a level two or three conflict and could thus be portrayed by a *kachahari* play. In contrast, the insurgency was at that time considered level one as well, but the war-related conflicts that rode the daily life of villagers were deemed out of *kachahari*'s reach. The inconsistency was rather interesting and questioned the assumed neutrality of the *kachahari* aesthetic space. I asked some actors about the group's choice, but the answer was not clear.

The following case study shows why the issue of the insurgency, and, therefore, staging conflict, was dropped. During the last days of the workshop, a group of actors devised a skit based on

a story of double allegiance common in many Nepali villages to experiment the possibility of staging a full play.¹²³ The frame ran as follows. The Maoists threaten a schoolteacher with requests of donations. The teacher is afraid, and is also worried for his son. Discussions about how to behave with the rebels involve family and neighbours. One night the Maoists arrive and ask for shelter and food for 15 guerrillas. The family say they have no vegetables and no money. Moreover, they are afraid that if the army come they might be caught in the crossfire or be accused of supporting the rebels. The frame¹²⁴ was stopped. The question raised by the *sutradhar* was challenging: if the man helps the Maoists the military may come and arrest his family members. If he doesn't, the Maoist may take revenge afterwards. The actors' discussions and rehearsals revealed that the plot was problematic, as it was not possible to determine who were the respective oppressor and oppressed. The actors abandoned the attempt to devise the play. The problem was considered beyond the possibilities of theatrical intervention. As a result, the war was considered an unsuitable topic for *kachahari* in Nepal at that time.

The rehearsal revealed that the criteria agreed upon by the group were not necessarily in accordance with their reality. It was not a matter of proximity to the problem or of centrality in the community that made the difference, as the previous model suggested; rather, the opposite was true. The insurgency, a level one political problem has very practical consequences for people's lives, even at the 'personal level' (level three). This is what prevented its fictional representation through theatre. The important thing was that 'public exposure' made the personal political. The criterion of usefulness was not applicable to the situation described above. Actors' discussions showed that certain situations carry their consequences well beyond the aesthetic space; the audience infer meaning from the putatively 'fictional' roles taken up by the actors/spect-actors. The level of exposure varied in context and time. Living inside the conflict areas exposed actors of partner groups¹²⁵ much more than those based in Kathmandu. The aesthetic space is indeed a political space, the distinction disappears, as the political performances and actors' fears of questioning power too openly described in Chapter three also show. The aesthetic space does not exist separate from everyday social space. It is this connection that makes representation in general and theatre in particular such a powerful political tool. In the next section, I will describe how *kachahari natak* was adapted to the particular conditions created by the declaration of the state of Emergency in 2005 and how this format was then carried on in Kathmandu even beyond the Emergency period.

¹²³ Based on a real story narrated by Kamal in December 2004

¹²⁴ The frame is the script performed until the critical moment when the *sutradhar* stops the play to ask the audience how to move ahead.

¹²⁵ Like many city-based theatre groups, Aarohan is linked to theatre groups based in different regions in Nepal, called 'partner groups'. They are linked through a partnership to the main group and perform shows in their local areas and are financially supported by the donors linked to the main group.

4. Searching for a format: an 'urban forum'

Street theatre is frequently associated with rural areas, because it is conceived as a means to facilitate communication with illiterate groups. Why, then, perform street theatre in Kathmandu where other media are available? Aarohan Theatre decided to train local groups for street performances in their own areas and to perform only in the capital. Rajkumar believes that they should not perform *kachahari* only in the villages as *kachahari* is the means through which they can fulfil their commitment towards their society. '*Kachahari* is our way to change society' he says (November 2004). So, Aarohan's exploration of a suitable forum format coincided with its adaptation to the city environment. In this section, I will first outline the dramaturgical development of the form and subsequently the aesthetics of forum theatre in Kathmandu.

Boal's 'pure' form of Forum Theatre (Boal 1978) recommends the performance of the whole script once. Subsequently, during a second performance, the audience can stop the play at any perceived oppression, so that the spect-actors can modify the course of action and try out ways of overcoming oppressive situations (Ibid.). Forum Theatre, however, has been adapted and modified in different ways (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 1983; Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 2008). Boal himself warns against dogmatic interpretations of his techniques and suggests actors follow the people's desires: 'TO [Theatre of the Oppressed] is not a Bible, nor a recipe book: it is a method to be used by people, and the people are more important than the method' (1998:120). Aarohan had adopted a classification distinguishing between Forum A and B. In the first form, it is the *sutradhar*¹²⁶ who stops the play at the end of the frame (closer to Boal's Forum Theatre). In the second, the play is stopped by the audience at any time (closer to Simultaneous Dramaturgy). In neither, however, was the frame replayed a second time as in the original version. During the period of my fieldwork, Aarohan always performed Forum A. The actors play the frame. Then the *sutradhar* asks the audience for suggestions about how to move out of the problematic situation. It is not the audience that decides at which point to change the characters' action, but rather the *sutradhar*. Therefore, the audience can only change the course of events from the crisis point chosen by the actors. The audience's range of choice is thus restricted in comparison to the original form. Afterwards, as in Boal's model, the actors/spect-actors perform the suggestion. Finally, the *sutradhar* inquires about the feasibility of the suggestions

¹²⁶ *Sutradhar* translates the roles usually referred to as *Joker* in the Theatre of the Oppressed literature. The word *sutradhar* is commonly employed in Nepal in mainstream message oriented street theatre. His/her role is to facilitate the audience understanding of the 'message'. The role of the *joker* in Forum Theatre, on the contrary, should be a critical one (Schutzman 2008). This cultural adaptation of the role blurs the critical difference between forum theatre and message-oriented street theatre. The *sutradhar* existed also in Sanskrit theatre, he was the director and stage manager (Iravati 2003).

offered, that is, whether they can be actually practiced in real life. Sunil explained that combining forum theatre and simultaneous dramaturgy in this way was a misinterpretation of the technique (2007). Nonetheless, this has become the form that is actually practiced in Nepal and is taught by Aarohan in Forum Theatre workshops.

A further issue worth considering is the construction of the skit. Aarohan's practice changed throughout the period of my fieldwork. For the first two months (November and December 2004), the group arranged workshops with representatives of the target community. Actors and community members discussed their problems to find a critical issue, which could then be worked through with *kachahari*. They then rehearsed the storyline in which community members acted with Aarohan actors. The performance then involved the whole community. Afterwards, the group decided to prepare a 'standard' play in advance and then perform it in different locations.

This shift in production mode reflects a much-debated problem in Theatre for Development and draws attention to the difference between process-oriented theatre and product-oriented theatre (Epskamp 2006) outlined in chapter one. The first is workshop-based: a specific, localized community is identified and through participatory methodologies actors and community representatives construct a performance. It is considered a 'people-centred/learner-centred' form of theatre exploring solutions to problems and raising grass-root's awareness (Ibid. 44). Epskamp includes both Forum Theatre and Community Theatre within this category. Theatre as a 'product' is instead considered 'message-centred and sender-oriented' (Ibid.) and focuses on behavioural change through persuasive communication. Street theatre, propaganda theatre and agit-prop usually fall into this category. The degree of community involvement is different, as I will detail in the next two sub-sections.

4.1. Issue-based *kachahari*

The number of *kachahari* plays performed by Aarohan increased from 3-7 a month in Nov-Dec 2004, to 14-15 in January 2005, because of their new partnership with the National Theatre of Norway. In January 2005, many actors went to India for a theatre festival. When they returned, they had to perform all the 15 performances within 10 days which often meant performing twice a day. In fact, the group is funded to perform a certain number of *kachahari* plays per month with the freedom of choosing the topic with the local communities. The hectic schedule produced a change in the previous *kachahari* practice. Actors chose to present a *kachahari* about corruption in government offices that

they had already performed before. The plays were performed in the streets. *Kachahari* theatre lost the connection with the specificity of a community. What I want to argue in this section is that contextual circumstances and financial pressures affected the methodology adopted by the actors. Except for technical differences – that is, the audience's participation in the forum – it became very similar to street theatre. Except for a performance during the opening of a photo exhibition, for the three months of the Emergency (Feb-Apr 2005) no *kachahari* was organized because of government restrictions. The end of Emergency and the gradual opening of the streets marked yet another phase of the development of *kachahari natak*. In May 2005 actors started performing the play about Devi's story (section 2), mostly in schools, about child labour. They continued to perform the same play for more than a year and a half.¹²⁷

I have chosen to use the play on child labour as a case study on the production process of a *kachahari natak*. Through this excursus, the reader should be able to perceive how *kachahari natak* differs from top-down forms of street theatre. However, comparisons between issue-based *kachahari* and workshop-based *kachahari* will be drawn at the end. Aarohan Theatre is the only group that I met in Nepal that has negotiated a particular form of partnership with both MS-Nepal and the National Theatre of Norway. *Kachahari natak* is part of a project aimed at strengthening local democracy in the first instance, and developing artistic practices in the second. These partnerships place Aarohan in a privileged position in comparison to most theatre groups working in Kathmandu as they have neither thematic nor aesthetic pressures from the donors. Yet, the analysis of the alteration of the form shows that in my year and a half of observation, the content presented to different schools remained the same and was not chosen by the community, but rather was imported 'from outside', like in top-down development theatre. Despite this crucial variation in the theatrical methodology, the genre continued to be called *kachahari* and be linked to forum theatre. Comparison with cross-cultural examples will be explored at the end. I will now detail the process of construction and performance of an issue-based *kachahari* play:

a. The topic: frame devising

Aarohan's actors practice a form of collective creation in producing both *kachahari* frames and political plays, although the process varies according to the situation. Collective creation is a methodology used by many alternative theatre groups who challenge the two-step traditional process,

¹²⁷ It was actually performed at least until August 2007, and then went on well into 2008 as well.

which separates the specialized tasks of scriptwriting by a playwright and the staging of the play. (Shank in Schneider 2002:122). Collective creation, though irreducible to a single formula, is characterized by carefully researched themes determined by audience context, lengthy creative processes through improvisation, and 'simple and flexible production techniques suitable for both indoor and outdoor venues' (Zavala 1980 in Van Erven, 2001:138). According to theatre theorists and practitioners Garcia and Buenaventura (Van Erven *ibid.*) collective creation goes beyond methodology and requires a particular kind of actor, 'a self-conscious socially responsible co-owner of the means of creative production' (*Ibid.*). For example, in Colombia a typical process of collective creation can be divided into three stages:

1. structural analysis of the stories collected in the field or through research, singling out conflict, characters' forces and motivations;
2. verbal and non-verbal improvisations by a group of artists to explore the conflicts while another group act as critics, evaluating the artistic effectiveness and ideological impact;
3. different subcommittees specialized in music, design and scriptwriting produce the different components of the performance that are subsequently integrated with the director (Van Erven 2001:140).

The process of creating a new play in Gurukul was not as structured as in the Columbian case. Artists usually called a meeting and discussed possible topics, often splitting into sub-groups. The following is an extract from my field notes taken during a meeting in which a *kachahari* frame was chosen.

21 December 2004. The meeting to decide the topic of the next *kachahari* is postponed several times. Second day of bandh, all the shops are closed and no public transportation is functioning. Actors tell me to eat quickly because the meeting is about to begin. It's 11 am. Nothing is happening, artists are chatting in the sun, or reading. The meeting was scheduled at 10 then postponed at 1pm. The hall is occupied by a dance group so rehearsal will start afterwards. The meeting starts at 2.30 pm. Suresh, Mani, Sarita, Bhola, Rajkumar, Aruna, Rajan, Kirstine,¹²⁸ and others. Suresh is the leader. Artists propose 6 topics that are voted by the group:

- women issues- domestic violence 1 vote
- child rights 6
- foreign employment 4
- internal struggle 1
- corruption 1
- human rights 2

The topic decided by the majority vote for the next *kachahari* is child rights. The group is divided into two subgroups. Kirstine and I are asked to participate in the discussions. I suggest starting with a workshop with some child workers, to

¹²⁸ Kirstine is a development advisor who worked with the group as part of the partnership with MS Nepal.

get first hand account of their lives to make a strong story and avoid stereotypes. The group accepts the idea. Kirstine suggests problematizing the issues, trying to explore wider connections, to avoid simply condemning child labour without exploring its root causes and complexities. The discussion falls into our daily experience. Biru is a teenager who works in the canteen. Yubaraj is against the fact that he is working in Gurukul instead of going to school and says that Thulo Manche¹²⁹, another boy working in the canteen does not want to go to school as he does not realize the importance of education. Yubaraj himself pushed him to go to school, to learn to read and write, to play a musical instrument but he refused. Yubaraj thus raises a question: how far can you 'push' people if they don't 'realize'? Biru and Thulo Manche have never gone to school. He shares his feelings of uneasiness about these facts. The groups join and share in the discussions. It is decided to divide the tasks. A small group will contact children's associations to check if Nepal has signed UN child rights papers, to check for the number of street children; others will go to talk to children working in hotels and in the streets. Despite the dedication, the impression is that the work is still dispersive and not rooted in a 'community'. The next meeting is scheduled for the next day at 4 pm. Afterwards the group continues rehearsal of the play performed for construction workers some days before. The rehearsal continues until 7 pm. [...] The morning after Rajan, Kamal and I, go to Save the Children Nepal to ask for some data but the person we were looking for was out. Similarly at Bal Mandir, the person responsible for the office is out. (December 2004)

Actors then met again a month later (28 January 2005) to devise the play storyline and fix some scenes. The planned research was not carried out and the story was based on actors' personal experience. The central idea would be retained in the final version, while the development of the story and the construction of the climax would change afterwards. In fact, the Emergency stopped the progress of the work and it wasn't taken up again until May 2005. The story was enriched through a workshop with the Kamlari Natak Samuha¹³⁰ from Dang-Deukuri. In April 2005, the Kamlari Group attended a 10-day workshop in Gurukul directed by one of Gurukul's artists, Saugat Malla. They prepared a stage production based on their *kachahari* work and their first hand experience of exploitation while working as domestic helpers.¹³¹ Boal stresses the importance of accurate information regarding the conflict to be dramatized. The protagonist/oppressed in fact encounters several obstacles/oppressors:

This search for suitable oppressors must not be random; the group which is creating the play must have genuine knowledge of the problem and must present an organic vision of the situation in which all the elements are true. Theatricality must not sacrifice truth (1998:62)

¹²⁹ This was the nickname of one of the boys working in the Gurukul canteen.

¹³⁰ The Kamlari Natak Samuha is a theatre group that performs exclusively about the *kamlari pratha* which is a practice common among many rural Tharu communities especially in the Western rural districts of the Tarai (Dang, Banke, Bardiya, Kailali, Kanchanpur). Poor families send their daughters aged 6-16 as *kamlaris* (girl-child indentured labour) to work in the their landlords houses or to well-off families in the city. The families receive annual payments of NRs. 4,000-5,000 (in the year 2005) and the girls work as domestic helpers. Despite the promises of education, many girls are exploited and abused. See more in Chapter six, section two.

¹³¹ While the group's *kachahari* in the villages targeted the families of girls sent to town to work, the city production was aimed at the urban, well-off 'receivers' of the girls.

When the group returned to work on their child labour frame, elements from the stage production, like plot, movements and lines were introduced together with moments of comedy. Characters and context were fleshed out in depth. Thus, the process of play construction was discontinuous, affected by the political situation as well as by the group artistic work, priorities and expectations. The initial play was mainly created out of the group's internal experience rather than by intensive research, running the risk of creating stock characters and plots. However, the first hand experience of the Kamlari artists added fresh, real life elements to both the frame and the actors' artistic skills, turning it into a powerful and sophisticated presentation.

b. The set: choosing a location

The responsibility of the organization of the *kachahari* performance is a task that was shared between actors. Rajkumar, Bhola, Kamal and Suresh were in turn responsible for choosing a place and arranging the details of the performance with a contact person, for example a youth club leader or the headmaster of a school. Very often the contact was chosen through personal connections. When *kachahari* was performed in the street the general location was usually selected by the team-leader, and then the group agreed upon the specific place. Performing in the streets means engaging in a continuous negotiation of physical and symbolic spaces. Most of the time, space was negotiated with street vendors or bus park keepers who willingly agreed to temporarily clear a piece of road for the sake of the theatre. In order to gather a crowd, actors looked for a place of dense human presence. But for the success of a play, they also tried to avoid places that were too noisy. As a result, actors always had to compromise between 'visibility' and 'audibility'. During the performance of a play, the circle of the performance becomes the focus of attention of the whole area. Because of the huge crowd that usually watches the performance, street vendors selling snacks like corn, peanuts, soybeans, or even clothes were also attracted. As soon as the play finishes and the actors leave, the sellers regain their space, taxis return to their parking corner. A street performance is a fluid event, at the intersection of social, artistic and practical concerns.

But the public space is also an administered space governed by authorities. In 2004, due to security reasons, the government established a rule that required actors performing in any public road to apply for a letter of authorization (*karyapatra*) to the Chief District Office (CDO). At the beginning of the month, members of the group had to request permission and then show the CDO authorization to the police who were patrolling the *chowks*, or crossroads, on the day of the performance. Performances in the streets usually ran smoothly, and sometimes police stopped to

watch the play themselves. The capital in the months preceding the Emergency was rather militarized. In January 2005, a policeman stopped a performance in the market space in the New Bus Park area. When he arrived, the thick group of people following the play split. Some actors remained in the circle, others went to talk with the policeman, followed by nearly half of the audience. Although the situation created moments of tension, the problem was sorted out quickly. The place was a private area patrolled by local security. Actors had talked to the police, but did not know about the security. The policeman wanted to stop the play. Aruna went to talk to the boss of the Bus Park Office and the problem was solved easily, facilitated by personal relations, as the boss was Aruna's *dai*. Other people left the space because of the interruption. When the performance restarted, and Rajkumar, the *sutradhar*, took up the last suggestions to continue, the environment was different, the connection with the audience was partly lost, and the *sutradhar* finished the forum quickly.

c. The frame

The frame of a *kachahari* play is a script workshopped among actors that presents a problem to the audience. Since Aarohan does not play the frame twice like in standard forum theatre and the play is stopped by the *sutradhar* rather than by the audience, the frame has the function of leading the audience to the climax of a conflict. Boal suggests representing a 'Chinese crisis' (1998:56) that is a situation in which the character is in danger but still has possibilities of finding a solution to his problems.¹³² For example, Forum Theatre would not work in a situation in which the oppressor is pointing a gun to the oppressed and is ready to shoot.

The frame is the fixed part of a *kachahari* and Aarohan actors throughout the months of performance had individual roles. If necessary, actors were substituted through doubling. Despite the absence of a written script, the performance was stable, as all artists knew each other's key lines and could improvise around them when required. During the construction of *kachahari* scripts, actors never engaged with the idea of introducing isolated cultural 'items' for artistic purposes. Yet, each play is deeply embedded in 'Nepali culture'; songs, body language, posture, clothes and language locate both actors and audience in an immediately familiar environment. For example, when, at the beginning of the play, Devi is in her village and recites a child's rhyme, swinging rhythmically, the children in the audience smiled and recognized both the lines and the movement. Actors follow their

¹³² The concept comes from the two ideograms used in Chinese language to translate the word 'crisis': 'danger' and 'opportunity' (Boal 2006:129).

'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990:66) in constructing the situations and the characterizations, performance after performance.

The use of traditional artistic forms is often recommended in development theatre performance (Epskamp 2006:47). Srampikal (1994) however warns against the revival of performances that existed in the past, but are no longer practiced, in the name of cultural preservation. Even Safdar Hashmi was critical about the use of traditional Indian performing art forms in street theatre. While admitting the importance of working with forms that the audience can be familiar with, he warned that such forms carry 'the traditional content with its superstitions, backwardness, obscurantism, and its promotion of feudal structures' (1992:141). He also criticized the decorative use that 'bourgeois intellectuals' and Western development agencies make of the 'Indianness' of traditional theatre, isolating it from the contemporary concerns of the people (Ibid. 142), and then exploiting the form (Ibid. 143). He instead praised the tradition that lives inside the artists. For example, he admitted that the songs he created for his plays were often based on folk songs that he learned as a child. Aarohan's actors, in building up both dialogues and songs, adopt the same procedure: they improvise and create out of shared cultural patterns that are also employed in the construction of political street plays (see Chapter three).

There are several aesthetic elements that can be singled out in order to analyze a street play and how the actors establish a connection with the audience: the structure of the story-line, the balance between entertainment and information (use of comedy), cultural and traditional elements (songs, clothes and postures), the use of language (register, sayings). I will take the *kachahari* performed at the Pinnacle Academy in Kalanki (Kathmandu) in July 2005 as a reference for the text and performance details.

The play is introduced by popular folk songs that are used to establish contact with the audience. The students sing along with the actors and clap. The *sutradhar* welcomes the audience and explains how *kachahari natak* works. He says the actors will perform a problem. When the play is stopped, the audience will become the directors and move the story forward. He asks them to watch quietly and attentively so that they will be able to help the actors. The atmosphere is very easy going and friendly.

Comedy is a powerful means by which to keep the audience engaged and at the same time allows the story to unfold (see Chapter three). For example, at the beginning, Devi's painful departure from her village is accompanied by the jokes of a very comic character, through the bus conductor who is a friend of her father. He speaks in a very loud voice, wears funny hats, often back to front. Kamal, who regularly plays the conductor, is an outstanding comic actor. His miming abilities are extraordinary: great gestures with the hands, often ending in the typical Nepali upturn to indicate that

there is not much else to do, and he fixes the audience with a direct and inquisitive gaze. Introduced by drumming of increasing intensity to create suspense, his character arrives from the back of the stage area, from behind the audience. He speaks directly to the audience, half singing half talking, and often pausing to stare at the other characters. The audience laughs. The conductor also mispronounces words and speaks very fast, with the rising high-pitched 'ehhhhh', typical of the spoken street language.

SCENE TWO

(bus stop-- trip towards Kathmandu)

BUS CONDUCTOR	enters, talks to the audience - sings --
[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]	
BUS CONDUCTOR	<i>Namaskar</i>
FATHER	<i>Namaskar</i>
BUS CONDUCTOR	Where are you going?
FATHER	To the city. These are no conditions to live in the village. All villagers have moved to the city.
	What shall I do living here? What will I eat?
BUS CONDUCTOR	Is that your daughter?
FATHER	Yes...
BUS CONDUCTOR	She has become big....I've become a <i>khulasi</i> (bus conductor)
FATHER	<i>Khulasi?</i> What is a <i>khulasi</i> ? I've only heard about <i>khalasi</i> .
BUS CONDUCTOR	The one who bangs the bus doors.
FATHER	That is <i>khalasi</i> .
BUS CONDUCTOR	Why are you going to Kathmandu?
FATHER	There is a family which needs some help with their household chores. They will also send her to school.
BUS CONDUCTOR	Good, good. Have you got a bus ticket?
FATHER	Yes
BUS CONDUCTOR	(He has a look at the ticket) This is the ticket of our bus.
FATHER	Yuck! (spits) There is no <i>acchi</i> (excrement)!
[AUDIENCE LAUGH]	
BUS CONDUCTOR	No, no. It's not like that. AA is for <i>alu</i> (potatoes) and CI is for <i>ciura</i> (beaten rice) Would you like to eat BCR?
FATHER	Now, what is BCR?
BUS CONDUCTOR	B is for <i>batmas</i> , C is <i>ciura</i> , R is <i>raksi</i> . [...]

The story is built up through a progression in which the girl's problems are presented alongside comical situations. The landlord's arrogance and disrespect for poor villagers is portrayed from the very beginning, when he mistakes his wife's relatives for flood refugees. Even the most dramatic moments, such as when Devi, played with great intensity by Pashupati, is severely scolded by the couple, or when the landlord and his wife engage in endless hysterical squabbles, are punctuated with comic elements that carry the audience along with the story without disguising the oppression or excusing it. The son breaks into his mother's narration a couple of times by unveiling her lies, thus becoming Devi's potential ally in the Forum. In fact, the audience frequently chose to replace him in order to help Devi.

SCENE EIGHT

(Family arrives – The wife rings the bell)

WIFE Come fast, come fast! What the hell is she doing?
SON If she has died, how could she come?
WIFE What the hell are you doing?
DEVI I was there.....
WIFE If you were there, why didn't you open the door for two hours?
SON Oh, mummy, it's not even been two minutes! (*dui minutes ta bha chaina*)
[AUDIENCE LAUGH]
WIFE Shut up! (to her son) Where is your father? (to Devi) Did you finish your work?
DEVI All, I washed the dishes, I washed the clothes
WIFE Have you changed the bed cover?
DEVI I did everything
LANDLORD (enters complaining) They are all robbers [about the neighbours outside]
SON Sir, who is a robber?
LANDLORD Why are you calling me sir?
SON My teacher's hair is like yours!
[AUDIENCE LAUGH]
LANDLORD They have broken our car windows!
WIFE It was your fault, so shut up! [...]

Comedy is used by actors to shed light on the inconsistencies of the wife's claims, thus exposing the oppressive situation. The climax of the play is reached when Devi asks the landlady to keep the promise made to her father and let her go to school. But the lady refuses.

Aarohan usually uses few and simple props in *kachahari*. Once aestheticized in the play, they acquire metaphorical meanings that strengthen the emotions conveyed by the actors. As Boal suggests, 'the important thing is the reality of the image, and not the exact image of reality. The important thing is to show what things are really like, as Brecht used to say, rather than merely showing what real things are like' (Boal 1998:54). Devi wears a school uniform while her father, usually played by Rajkumar, wears a worn out *topi* - village clothes - and carries a bag, to indicate that he is going to travel. His 'village' background is also shown by deferential manners and a stooped posture while walking. His characterization is totally different from the landlord, played by Saugat, who is all the time rushing, and who wears sunglasses and a trendy cap in a fashionable urban style. Devi carries a black cloth that represents the carpet but it symbolizes also the oppressions she has to face. After finishing work, she picks up the son's book to study. But the book symbolizes the education that she is excluded from receiving. All these elements give the *kachahari* frame the immediacy and familiarity that allows the audience to identify with the characters. Unlike ethnic theatre groups like the Kamlari from Deukuri Valley who wear Tharu traditional dresses to perform, Aarohan actors adopt a casual style. Rather than creating an 'objectified' culture for their plays, actors make use of 'culture' as it is practiced in everyday Kathmandu life.

d. actors and directors

When the frame finishes, the *sutradhar* invites the audience to participate in finding a solution to the problem. At first, he involves the audience collectively, re-establishing the channel of communication created at the beginning. Yubaraj has been the *sutradhar* in most of the *kachahari* plays performed by Aarohan. This is an abstract from a video-recorded performance:

SUTRADHAR	You have seen all the problems here, what is happening in this drama, what do you think?
AUDIENCE	Nice, nice....
SUTRADHAR	The girl is not allowed to study, what are your feelings?
AUDIENCE	Bad
SUTRADHAR	Should this girl get to study or not?
AUDIENCE	Study, study
SUTRADHAR	Therefore, what should this girl do to study in this house?
AUDIENCE	Struggle
SUTRADHAR	How? In this situation, what should the girl do?
AUDIENCE	Should protest (<i>birodh garne</i>) [SOME AUDIENCE LAUGHS]... run away....
SUTRADHAR	Now you are the directors of the play, whatever you suggest we will do it here, as the boy suggested, we will make her run away from the house. Where to go?
AUDIENCE	To her father, her home!

The *sutradhar* establishes proximity with the audience in order to create a 'safe' environment where the audience can talk openly. In this case, the life situation of the girl is not close to the life of the students. No potential 'oppressor' is present in the school, thus, creating a 'safe' environment basically involves helping the children overcome their shyness and encourage them to participate with suggestions. The *sutradhar* facilitates the enactment of any suggestions offered by the audience, even those that are not agreed by all. For example, the first suggestions, involving fighting or escaping, are not consensual:

REHEARSAL 1

SUTRADHAR	(Devi plays the first suggestion) She picks up her clothes, runs away, where to go now? Now what to do?
DEVI	I have money but I don't have the address of my father where should I go?
SUTRADHAR	Now what should she do?
AUDIENCE	Go to the police, send her to a ladies hostel!
SUTRADHAR	How to reach the hostel? This girl is studying in class 3, can she run away from her house, what can she do?
AUDIENCE	She can't
(A teacher gives his suggestion)	
SUTRADHAR	The teacher said it's not possible to run away from the house and find her father, we have to do it again. What else can she do? ...which can also be practiced in real life....

AUDIENCE Go to CWIN [an NGO working with street children]
 SUTRADHAR Who will take her to CWIN?
 AUDIENCE Social workers...

[LOTS OF SUGGESTIONS SHOUTED TOGETHER]

SUTRADHAR How can she meet them? She said neighbours can help (they rehearse) first she will try to convince the lady [neighbour]

Mohan (2004) describes the forum plays performed by Jana Sanskriti in India as a 'project of persuasion'. Indeed, persuasion plays a central role in carrying the audience into the aesthetic space of the performance where fiction and reality blur. The frame, in fact, through a skilful alternation of comedy, familiar everyday life situations, gestures and phrases, prepares the ground for the Forum where the relation between actors and audience becomes closer. By means of direct address, eye contact, and reassurance through smiling, the *sutradhar* and the actors persuade the spect-actors into 'believing' and make the performance space accessible, casual and informal. Yet, I think the *sutradhar* moves beyond the role of persuading the audience to identify with the characters on stage by actually bringing them into the imaginative space. The *sutradhar*, in fact, opens possibilities by creating voids and gaps, by asking questions to which spect-actors have to provide practical answers. By opening these gaps, the *sutradhar* acts on the audience's 'desires'. Desire is entrenched in the theatrical experience. Hastrup remarks that 'desire is born of absence; what is already possessed is no longer the object of desire' (2004:43); in particular, she affirms that 'players desire to become what they are not' (Ibid.). The *sutradhar* helps the audience to become 'players', and helps them fill with actions and words the gaps and doubts created by his questions (see Chapter two).

Yet, 'make-believe is making, not faking, and rooting imaginative action in facts' (Ibid. 51). Only if illusion is real and grounded can the process of identification take place. Acting in a *kachahari* performance is very demanding and requires a mix of technique and a deep knowledge of both the issue performed and of the socio-cultural context of the audience. Acting becomes even more engaging during the second part of a *kachahari* play, when the actors have to enact the suggestions given by the audience and improvise when the spect-actors enter the scene and take up roles. Alertness and competence are crucial. Mani Pokharel, quoted earlier in chapter three, is an actor who also works in a government office. In the *kachahari* on corruption, he usually played the role of the officer. It is a role that he knows very well because of his job. He emphasizes that to play a role well, you need to 'have knowledge on what to do'. He explains how he plays the 'oppressor':

My role is very strong and quick, you need to think [fast] and take decisions. [...] I write many times [in role] but while writing, I always listen to the audience. My mind and my ears listen to the audience all the time. When a person comes to the stage and give[s] suggestions, I have a quick answer. (Mani, informal conversation, January 2004)

There is no time for thinking in a *kachahari*; improvisations have to be fast as Mani explains, in order to be 'credible', just like in a real life situation.

The boundaries between reality and fiction are in fact very subtle. The process of identification can break if they are not sustained by 'credible' replies. In May 2005, Aarohan conducted a workshop in a *sukumbasi basti* (squatter slum) in the eastern part of the capital. Some residents gathered at a cultural centre for the workshop preceding the performance. What emerged as the most urgent problem was the fact that due to the heterogeneity of the inhabitants, it was very hard to organize collective activities like shifts for road cleaning. Moreover, it was difficult to hold a preparatory meeting with workshop, because although a time would be agreed upon, many people would not turn up and therefore no discussion could take place. Actors and participants created and rehearsed a short frame on this topic that was performed soon after on the local green.

The *sutradhar* stopped the play at the critical point of the unattended meeting. He asked the audience how to solve the problem. The audience gave different suggestions that the actors performed and spect-actors even entered the circle to substitute actors. In this frame, the organizer of the meeting represented the oppressed, as his efforts were systematically boycotted by the inhabitants of the slum. A girl from the audience replaced the organizer/oppressed and started knocking at different imagined doors to spread information about the next scheduled meeting.

At a certain point, an actress dismissed the invitation saying she was busy at work, as she was a teacher. Hearing the line, a woman standing near me in the audience sighed with surprise and incredulity. She said it could not be true. This could not be their story as none of them had such a prestigious job as teaching. Her identification with the story was broken. She lost 'belief' in what was going on. The actors did not even notice her comment, they continued playing, and finished the forum. I could not find out if the woman's reaction was shared, or if it was an isolated case. But her reaction certainly showed that she was seeking some resonance with her real life situation, some echo of her reality, that she had begun identifying with the characters, and she had been carried away by the 'magic', until the actress introduced the implausible element and disrupted her sense of imagined possibilities within her everyday reality. It was no longer 'her' story. It was 'fiction'. The actress, unaware of the complex social structure of the *basti*, introduced a notion so alien that it ceased to have any meaningful relationship with the possibilities inherent in her everyday situation and broke the exploration of real life. This example shows that acting in Forum Theatre is an extremely challenging activity. Over and above the necessary crafting of the imagined-reality space, it requires a heightened awareness, a particular sensibility, in order to avoid transgressing the socio-political context of the audience, losing their attention, and dissipating that moment when theatre helps in

self-reflection, self-awareness and the discovery and realisation of possibilities inherent in every problematic situation.

e. The audience

As I explained in the introduction, I did not intend the audience to be part of my inquiry. However, in order to determine the topicality of 'child labour' among school children,¹³³ I carried out a survey among 748 students from classes 5 to 10 in 9 private schools. I explained the objective of my research to the headmasters. Teachers were directed as to how to conduct the questionnaire so as to maintain consistency i.e. giving students 45 minutes maximum, not helping students with the answers, etc.

The results revealed that 15 percent of the students had a house-helper in their home, 81 percent did not and 4 percent did not answer. Among the 15 percent, a great majority responded that their house-helper was not interested in studying or was over the age for school. In only two cases did the students record that they felt uncomfortable and bad after seeing the play because they were living in a similar situation. The play was much appreciated: 39 percent liked it 'very much', 45 percent said it was 'good', and 14 percent found it OK, while 4 percent did not like it.¹³⁴ A substantial number of the students liked the story (28.5 percent) and the message that it taught (28 percent). Students took the play very seriously. When they had to categorize it, 45 percent found it 'serious', 16 percent found it 'fun', and for 10.9 percent it was like a 'game'. Extra definitions were added by the students in a blank space: for 10.5 percent it provided 'education' and 13 percent saw it as a representation of 'society'. The overall data for physical participation were rather low: 11.8 percent managed to give suggestions while only 4.2 percent entered the play to act during the Forum part. The most frequent reasons cited for not giving suggestions or acting were lack of time and opportunity, and lack of acting skills.

This data raises interesting questions. On the one hand, students recognize 'child labour' as a real social problem. On the other, it does not seem to be an issue they regard as their own. The protagonist, who is usually replaced by an audience member, is the house-worker who cannot study. Students attending private schools are more likely to have a house-helper at home rather than being house-helpers themselves. Therefore, the students replacing the protagonist could not fully identify or

¹³³ The play was performed in private schools of the Kathmandu area.

¹³⁴ These are the categories I used in my questionnaire.

empathise with the character and circumstances of the protagonist. Boal (2006:126) describes three kinds of identification the spect-actor can have with the protagonist:

1. *absolute identity*, when the Protagonist incarnates exactly the same problem as the audience faces;
2. *analogy*, when the audience's problem is not exactly what is shown, but a strong analogy exist between the two; and
3. *solidarity*, when the audience's concerns are not identical, nor analogical, but a relationship of deep solidarity allows the spect-actor to offer his or her sensibility and knowledge to try to open up a range of possibilities, so that the Protagonist may find solutions to his own problem.

A consideration from within the Forum Theatre discourse can be drawn at this point. Spontaneously, at times, during the performance of the play the *sutradhar* allowed the sympathetic son of the landlord to be replaced by a spect-actor, contravening the standard Forum Theatre practice in which only the 'oppressed' can be replaced by a spect-actor. In this way, however, a 'natural' solution could be found in this way, closer to their own real life, and students could move from 'solidarity' to 'analogy' or 'absolute identity'. Had the story been told from the son's point of view rather than the house-worker's, the students would have probably been able to identify with the character in a closer way and see in the play a resemblance of their life.

Moreover, the play is perceived as a theatre performance, requiring skill to participate rather than an 'open space' for discussing problems. This may be due to the students' lack of experience with Forum Theatre. Unlike other theatre groups which work in workshop situations with a reduced number of participants and for a long period of time, Aarohan adopts the street theatre practice of giving a one-off performance for large audiences (200-400). This makes their theatre practice an excellent instrument for communication, like other forms of street theatre, but is not necessarily the most suitable way to discuss real life conflicts or to rehearse solutions. The interactive and revolutionary power of Forum Theatre in this case seems diluted.

f. The post-performance discussions and follow-up

During the first part of my fieldwork (December – January 2005) the performing group met after each *kachahari* for 'firing meetings' during which each actor had the opportunity to share their feelings and opinions about the performance with both the cast and the director. Firing meetings were moments of self-reflexivity that explored strengths, weaknesses and ways to improve; they smoothed over



Fig. 23. Rajan as joker introduces the rules of *kachahari natak* to the students and performs a game requiring arms coordination.



Fig. 24. The artists gather in a circle a sing the opening song.



Fig. 25. The father performed by Suresh calls his daughter, performed by Pasupathi, to go to Kathmandu.



Fig. 26. A banner symbolizes the bus to Kathmandu.



Fig. 27. Father and daughter are greeted by the house-owner played by Saugat.



Fig. 28. The wife, played by Aruna, shows Devi the different rooms she has to clean.



Fig. 29. Devi helps the son to get ready to school but she cannot go herself.



Fig. 30. A teacher (wearing a purple sari) enters the forum section and tries to persuade the couple to send Devi to school.



Fig. 31. A student replaces Devi.

occasional clashes and united the group. Cohesion and immediate mutual understanding are necessary in an improvisation-based theatrical performance.

The firing meetings were held regularly if the development adviser or other foreign guests were present. But when the 'child labour play' started to be performed, these meetings became infrequent and eventually ceased altogether. The actors spoke with the director only if they had problems.

Aarohan Theatre Group did not practise any form of follow-up activity to assess the impact of the performance. Actors point out that at the beginning of their experience with *kachahari*, they went back to certain schools to see if any transformation had taken place, but after a while they stopped doing this. And yet, when discussing an example of a 'successful' performance, actors refer directly to the follow-up. The group performed a play about drug addiction in a squatter's area. Suresh, an actor and a martial arts teacher, returned, out of his own initiative, over the course of a year to teach martial arts and theatre. He recalls that

...The performance was successful because a lot of audience participated and they tried to speak about their problems through theatre. We tried to do our best. Finally we arrived at some consensus on how to solve this problem. The play was successful in highlighting the issues. But how to solve them? And in the play I suggested to go there, personally work with the young people of the areas. And they said yes, please come and we started [he lowers his eyes and smiles]. I went there and started a martial arts class with drug users. In the starting phase they were dangerous, and I gave them NRs 10, 20 for drugs. They eat [the drugs] and then they came to the class [...] I spent some money. Slowly I increased the exercise and slowly, slowly they decreased the drugs. I went there every day from 6 to 7.30-8 AM. Then slowly they called me, 'teacher, teacher, guru, guru'. Then slowly they didn't use drugs in front of me, they started to respect me. Then one month passed, two months passed, in six months they quit the drugs and they started to do more and more exercise (Interviewed in English, July 2006)

Follow-up, which Aarohan theatre does not conduct regularly, is routine practice with other theatre groups using Forum Theatre techniques. For example, Adrian Jackson from Cardboard Citizens, a London-based theatre company, claims that in order to naturally and productively involve the audience, a forum piece should 'provoke and seduce' (2009:44). As a result, his group has moved away from Forum Theatre as an 'event' towards an 'Engagement Programme' (Ibid.) in which, after the performance, the actors¹³⁵ discuss with the audience how they can follow-up the ideas suggested during the play. Afterwards, many participants start attending the workshops run by the company, or actors accompany the participants to one of the charities linked to the company so that their desire for change can be actualized, in order to 'extrapolate from rehearsal in the theatre to performance in

¹³⁵ The actors in the company are ex-homeless and they often perform in hostels and day centres where the audience is composed of homeless. Therefore, audience and actors have a strong, shared experience.

real life' (Ibid.). Despite Aarohan Theatre group's decision not to do follow-up activities (see next section on identity), many actors believe that one performance of *kachahari* is not enough to bring about the transformation advocated in the play. 'Theatre is only a weapon', comments an actor confidentially, '*Kachahari* is not only theatre, it is social work'.

4.2. Workshop-based *kachahari*

Let us move now to the second case-study in which the issue to stage is chosen during a workshop with actors by some representatives of the community where the play would later be performed.

In December 2004, during a Forum Theatre workshop for artists belonging to Aarohan and their partner groups led by Julian Boal¹³⁶ in Gurukul in December 2004, Sunil Pokharel conducted a workshop for 19 actors, 12 construction workers and 2 trade union leaders as a 'practical'. They discussed problems the workers faced at their work place. The labourers had migrated from different parts of Nepal, and were of mixed age and ethnicity. Some had been working in the capital for many years. Others had recently migrated and were hesitant to speak about themselves, but the introductory games created a situation that facilitated talking and being listened to. The group decided to perform a *kachahari* play about how employers exploited workers by not paying them wages and not providing them health care when injured. The scripting process was collective through discussions between actors and workers, followed by improvisation. The place and time of performance were chosen strategically. The following day at 6 AM in Bhimsen Ghola, a crossroad near a river where labourers met in the morning and waited for middlemen to pick them up for daily jobs. The workers' bosses would also be present. Some of the workers rehearsed with the actors and performed the following day.

The play was an extraordinary event in comparison to 'every day' *kachahari* performances. It was recorded by the group cameraman and observed by both Julian Boal, who conducted the workshop, and by the other workshop participants. It was, therefore, staged as an example of how *kachahari* theatre was performed in Nepal. Unlike in 'normal' performances, however, Sunil Pokharel conducted the Forum as the *sutradhar*. The performance was followed by a discussion concerning the weaknesses and strengths of both technical and theatrical aspects of the play. Among the difficulties, artists highlighted the limited space available for the stage, the difficulty of hearing due to traffic

¹³⁶ Julian Boal is Augusto Boal's son. He is a leader of Theatre of the Oppressed workshops as well as the director of the Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed in Paris. He has given training worldwide and in particular, he is associated to the work of Jana Sanskriti (see Chapter one, section 2.2.3)

noise, and the topic and power structures were not clear to all actors. Observers praised, instead, the powerful manner actors used to gather people (pretending to fight in the 'invisible theatre' manner), the good structure and rhythm of the play, the excellent 'joking', and the sincerity and friendliness of the actors.

From an aesthetic and dramaturgical point of view the whole discussion was precise and revealing, and the performance was regarded as successful. Yet, in my opinion, what went unnoticed in the artists' comments was the realization of the power of the workers' participation in the whole process and the social components of the play, as well as the social interaction created by performing such a relevant play in that context.

An interview I carried out four months later with Bikram, a union leader who had himself taken part as an actor, revealed that the play had been successful to the point of bringing about desired changes in the workers' lives, such as having their bosses pay them a regular salary. Bikram said that through the performance they received new ideas on how to face their issues. They had already met before the play and discussed their problems, but they could not find a way out. The labourers were afraid of speaking. They felt the power was in the hands of the employers. In the play they were not afraid, they 'opened their hearts', said Bikram, miming the gesture with his hands. He added that when he came to Gurukul for the workshop, he realized they should not be afraid of any boss because what they were asking for were their rights; that is, that they should receive their wages on time. Bikram explained he had arrived in Gurukul with his friends; they were asked their names and some information about themselves, and then they talked about the problems they had with their bosses, and rehearsed the play. From Bikram's words, it became apparent that finding an 'audience' who actually listened to them and legitimized their claims had been an empowering experience in itself. He recounted that before the play the workers had been beaten, but after the performance the brokers were afraid because if they were not paid on time, the workers would perform the play again, in Bhimsen Gola, in front of the company building, or at their work place. The play, and the public exposure that it brought about, became a bargaining tool for the workers. It was not perceived as a 'mere' representation or *natak*, but rather as a 'real thing', with the 'real' consequences of making 'public' unpleasant truths. The *kachahari* play inserted itself in the wider process of conscientization carried out by the union members who not only participated in the workshop and play but continued to maintain the link between the fictional and the real world after the *kachahari* was over. Workers and union leaders created a stronger bond through the play and created a group who continued to use theatre to make workers aware of their rights (see Chapter six)

After the play Bikram came back to see other stage plays; he loved theatre, he said. What he liked about the *kachahari* was the fact that it was connected to life and helped with life. He also

liked the fact that working class people had open access to Forum Theatre: 'People who are not affluent can see the play. The audience can interrupt the action to raise their problem, to show whatever they feel. People from every class can act'. He also points out that in contrast, proscenium theatre was only for people with higher income because NRs 50 for tickets is prohibitive for the workers.

Creating a *kachahari* through a workshop enhanced the topicality of the play presented, making it highly relevant to the audience. The boundaries between life and theatre could blur. Performance could be powerful because most of the audience had had experience of the situation portrayed. The workshop became a space in-between where transformation and awareness could start. Workshops could – usually, but not always - increase the familiarity and closeness between actors and community members that facilitated participation in the interactive part of the *kachahari*. Citizens' active participation in the frame helped the audience establish a stronger connection with the performers and the union movement became a container for the play, just like the CMDP was for the *loktantrik natak*.

However, performing *kachahari* through workshops is very much time consuming. According to some artists, there is also increased uncertainty and the possibility of breakdown or obstacles to performance. Allowing community members to participate in the creation of the frame obliges actors to identify specifically with the content in ways they may not be familiar with. This is a way of handing over, at least partly, the means of artistic production to the audience and relinquishing control of the situation. When the conflict portrayed through theatre reflects and distorts a real life issue, the risk of 'failing' may be high. Sunil recalled an instance in which, through a workshop, the actors realised that the real problem expressed by the students was the fact that the teachers beat them. However, when informed about the situation, the headmaster asked the actors to change the topic. The actors felt that the 'theatre of the oppressed' had turned into 'the theatre of the oppressor'. The theatrical experience strengthened rather than changed the oppression. Oppressors may refuse to participate, but if they do, the possibility of triggering real-life resistance increases, as the case of Bikram confirms. Similarly, in a workshop that took place in Gurukul, Rajan felt that the *kachahari* would fail because the issue was very complex (nepotism and unequal opportunities in a martial arts club), and they were not sure the 'oppressors' would accept the invitation to attend the play the following day. In fact, they did not and the *kachahari* performance was cancelled.

But how is 'failure' interpreted? The meaning of 'success'/'failure' in *kachahari* performances is central to the success of the theatre itself. Success in terms of audience numbers and smooth performance of the play, like in the case of Devi's story, may not be the same as success

in term of topicality and audience identification, as in the case of the construction workers. Less controlled, artistically under-rehearsed and one-off plays such as that performed in Bhimsel Gola can in fact bring about unexpected outcomes.

5. A Cultural Army for a Cultural Revolution

Respected people, empty stomachs ask us grain, naked bodies say 'give us a piece of cloth' but the killer ruler, hangman-like ruler holds a sword against the starving stomachs of the people. They beat naked bodies with sticks. Unemployed youth say 'give us space to let our sweat flow', but unemployed youth [are] put in prison. Journalists invoke 'let us print justice and let us write the truth'. But hangman-like rulers put journalists in prison locked in handcuffs. Then started the journey of the rebels in 2052 Falgun 1st, the road of blood. Samana Parivar has walked the road of blood for a decade, Samana Parivar, the artists belonging to NKP(Maobadi). Now they are in your cities, in your villages. For a decade they have been singing songs of bombs, weapons, revolution, sacrifice, tears, but now we are singing songs of peace because it's the people's desire. Nepali mud and Nepali [people] are saying 'give us grain, give us peace, give us a space to sweat'. Respecting Nepali people's feelings and desires now our party NKP (Maobadi) with deep feelings of responsibility come out to campaign peace, a journey towards peace. (Commander, public speech, October 2006)

During the period in which Aarohan Theatre performed *kachahari* in Kathmandu, in the year 2005-06, another form of theatre, or performance for social change was rather common, first in the hills and areas occupied by the Maoist rebels and then, after the People's Movement in April 2006, also in the cities and in the capital. As I outlined in the introduction (2.2.3), cultural work plays a relevant role in leftist popular movements. Songs, dances, dramatic performances and cinema have been employed to popularize communist ideology in China (Mao 1960; 1967; Lang and Williams 1972), Peru (Starn 1995), Chile (Morris 1986), Cuba (Moore 2006) or Nicaragua (Judson 1987). In Nepal, ideas fostering the cultural front that characterized the Jhapa communist movement in the 1970s, which I have described in chapter two in relation to the development of progressive songs, were resumed by the Maoist revolutionaries in the 1990s. The cultural front of the communist movements that started in Nepal in different historical periods was steered by Mao's ideas on art and literature outlined in the Yanan Forum which was known in Nepal since the 1950s (Onesto 2006:136). The political dimension of performance is thus clearly expressed in the Maoist cultural programmes. Grounded on the 'Nepali' format and practice of conveying socio-political meanings through songs, dances and drama (see Chapter two; Mottin 2010), Maoist cultural programmes can be described as the most recent confluence of local artistic folk and political forms into Marxist cultural practice of Russian and Chinese derivation (Ibid.). Cultural programmes are usually organized during, and as an essential part of,

public political meetings. Dances, songs and, at times, short plays entertain the audience both before the arrival of political leaders and during their political speeches, thus becoming political rituals where party ideology and strategies are both publicized and legitimized (Ibid.). In the conclusion of this chapter, I will provide a comparison between the *kachahari natak* described so far and revolutionary theatre. For this purpose, I have analysed a play performed during the Campaign for Republic 2006 (*Ganatantra Abhiyan*) as a case study from which I will select text abstracts. I will then contextualize the example by briefly exploring the artists' position in the Maoist movement at the end of chapter five.

6. Revolutionary *Natak*: 'After understanding'

The play 'After understanding' (*Bujhepachi*) consists of three scenes set respectively in Kathmandu, in a rural village and in the Royal Palace. It opens with a girl moaning in the streets during a demonstration. She has been injured and cannot see her friends around. When one of them arrives to help her run away, they comment about the popular movement and the value of sacrificing their own life for the betterment of the country. They also recount to each other how one of their comrades was killed. The second scene is set in a village *chowk*, where people stop and exchange views regarding the future of the country. News about the death of the boy during the demonstrations reaches the village and provokes reactions from villagers. Rumours of the upheaval also echo inside the Royal Palace in the third scene. The King and Queen are still unable to foresee the possibility of their demise. In the background, popular slogans in favour of a republic intensify.

Unlike the plays devised with villagers by Naxalite revolutionary cultural groups in India (Kunnath, personal communication, 2004), this and other plays performed by Maoist cultural groups in Nepal are based only on the collective work of the troupe rather than a collaboration with villagers. In this case, the cultural group Commissar scripted most of the text. It was later modified according to the team's suggestions during rehearsals. Such plays were prepared for performance rather than for spectator/audience involvement. In fact, the play was staged both outdoors and indoors during public meetings organized by the party as part of its political campaign. The performance style is simple and realistic, recalling standard street plays. Let me quote a section from the first scene. The actors used costumes and few props. In this scene, the girl injured in the opening scene (A1) meets her comrades who come to help her (A2, A3, A4 and A5). The girl character links the initial reporting of the demonstrations with the subsequent description of the same to the comrades that were not present.

(Sound of a bullet blasting)

A3: Did you hear the blast of a bullet?

A2: Yes I did.

A3: Friend.... [approaching the injured girl]

A1: The sound of a bullet.... After taking my friend the police left... and he was killed by the bullet. Another friend has become martyr....

A4: If our young people are ready to let their blood flow, what can a meaningless bullet do? I don't feel any fear inside myself. I'm not going to leave this movement... as long as the people's good days haven't come, the sun of justice hasn't risen and these totally pitch dark nights are not finished, my friends.....

A5: You said right, the sacrifice of the brave will not leave the world silent. Rather, the flame of fire shining so brightly will give birth to *lakh* of braves. And we'll fight to make this black rule fall.

A3: Oh friend, when the people made of steel go ahead to climb the top of the mountain to fulfil the martyrs' dream, who can stop them? If somebody attempt to stop [them], then they will be compelled to live inside the rotten black rule, my friend.....

A5: We should not live in the night, my friends. When the rulers reach their last stage, they shoot bullets showing their cowardice. When power enters people's heart, a different light is enlightened which gives me the fire to fight, my friend.

A1: I have lost my hand... my blood flowed... I don't have any regret towards anybody. But if this black rule will continue, then there will be regrets for all those who desire justice....

A4: First of all, we should treat the wounded, the movement has lessened ... the police have gone to their camps.

A3: You are right, let's move away quickly.¹³⁷

In this section, the dialogue mixes realistic descriptions with Maoist jargon and metaphors. The conversation evolves around the theme of martyrdom which is common in Maoist songs and writing (de Sales 2003; Lecomte-Tilouine 2006). For example, the king's government – and in general non-Maoist forms of governance – is described with metaphors linked to the semantic field of 'darkness', such as 'pitch dark nights', or 'nights' in opposition to the 'light', such as 'flame of fire shining so brightly', 'a different light is enlightened which gives me the fire to fight', 'the sun of justice' brought by Maoism and by Maoist combatants. This is how the same metaphor is used in a song

With a beautiful picture of the horizon

We people's army come smiling as red rays

We have come filling sad people's hearts with happiness

We have come spreading light in those dark villages

We have come crossing floods and thunders

We have come fulfilling martyrs' dream

(From 'A Beautiful Horizon', in Asthaka Swarharu)

¹³⁷ This is my translation from Nepali.



Fig. 32. Final scene of the Cultural Programme staged at the Nepal Academy in September 2006.



Fig. 33. Leaders of the Cultural Section of the CPN (Maoist) head a rally in Chitwan, October 2006.



Fig. 34. Leaders sing the 'Internationale' with a raised clenched fist at the opening of the cultural programme, Chitwan 2006.



Fig. 35. Some members of the audience also raise their fists and sing along.



Fig. 36. Dancers wear Chinese-style martial art costumes during the song *Yugle aja bhanchha* (Today the epoch says).



Fig. 37. A Bhojpuri dance during the same programme, Chitwan 2006.



Fig. 38. Crowd crams the space around the stage in a public assembly in Khula Manch, Kathmandu, September 2007.



Fig. 39. Sen Chyang artists performing in Khula Manch during the Vijay Sabha (Assembly for victory) held in September 2007; in the background the singers.



Fig. 40. The audience claps and record with cell phone the songs and dances

The phrase 'let blood flow' recurs both in songs and in the commander's anchoring of the cultural programs to describe the sacrifice of the rebels to fulfil the dreams of the martyrs:

*He is not dead, he has become a candle of faith
Blood has not flown, it has become the flame of fire
(From 'He is not dead' in Asthaka Swarharu)*

The anchoring of cultural programmes is a genre in itself as commanders not only introduce the songs' content and their meaning within the wider political context. They also quote Maoist poems and other artistic productions to support their claims.

For example, Sen Chyang commander Rajan, opened his introductory speech in 2006 by citing a poem written by Krishna Sen:

*Oh rulers
We won't accept your autocracy and orders
However you spread the orders
No matter how you suppress
If you can take control of the senses
Keep the truth in jail
But, oh, dictator
Against your cruelty and self interest
We will keep raising our voice
We will keep raising our voice*

Ladies and gentlemen, I recited few lines from *Pratibadhata*, 'Commitment', in fact while reciting the poem I'm feeling very sad. This is the pain of all of us and of all our martyrs, our Krishna Sen Ichhuk, our great master of literature, the heart beat of the people, every people believe that if you put him in our eyes he will not hurt you [he is a very good person] and a very talented warrior, he's not in front of us at the moment. I read his poem *Pratibadhata*. From the blood of all our cultural martyrs like him the very talented, our Samana Sanskritik Battalion was born (October 2006).

Moreover, as I have explained elsewhere (Mottin 2010), anchoring is a performance in itself both because of rhetorical devices they use and because of the speaking style. Cross-references from poems or songs are played in a rhythmic crescendo. The speech becomes faster and faster till it reaches the climax of the discourse where the speaker pauses. The introduction is very lively. By skilfully alternating different rhythms of speech, use of repetitions and catchy phrases, and variations in the intensity of voice, the audience's attention is aroused and sustained. Anchoring does not only take place in live programmes but also in recorded MCs and CDs. For example, the party cultural

leader Ishwar Chandra Gyawali introduced the revolutionary songs performed by Sen Chyan Cultural Group in 'Asthaka Swarharu'. This is an example of the integration of artistic production within the party image-construction and celebration project. As a result, theatricality emerges from the cultural programmes and makes them not only representational but also performative. By representing and objectifying political ideas they also perform and publicly legitimize and reaffirm them. Cultural programmes, in fact, can be conceptualized as political rituals that create 'communities of feelings' (Berezin 2001:93).

7. Conclusion

When comparing issue-based *kachahari* with workshop-based *kachahari* several considerations need to be taken into account.

First, the workshop emerges as a central part of the Forum Theatre process. It is the moment when a group of community members can debate a shared issue, experiment with theatrical tools and games and feel part of the planned performance. Boal defines the workshop as the place where contact between a group and the actors starts (1998:47). In Boal's model, workshops can be of different length: two hours, days, weeks or months. But they are integral to the rehearsal of the play with the community participants. Let me cite Boal's definition of rehearsals:

It should be understood that rehearsals are already a cultural-political meeting in themselves. Theatre will be the medium of the encounter, theatre will be enacted, but it is very important to be aware that it is the citizens who will be making the theatre, around their own problems, trying their own solutions. In this context, every exercise, every game, every technique is both art and politics (1998:48)

Therefore the workshop-rehearsal is at the heart of Forum Theatre but in *kachahari natak* as generally practiced by Aarohan during the period of my fieldwork the workshop was removed. Conducting workshops with community groups and scripting plays with them is time-consuming, and maybe gives rise to a sense of responsibility deriving from the knowledge acquired during the performance that may bind artists in the post-performance as I will discuss later on in this section. Workshop-based *kachahari* stretched theatre from the realm of artistic performance to that of social work. Issue-based *kachahari* brought it back to its starting place. The audience participation and agency was thus limited because non-artists could not choose a topic and create a script about it with the theatre group.

Second, the topicality of the performance facilitates the research for solutions that can work in real life. *Kachahari* theatre, as performed by Aarohan Theatre Group, changed from being mainly process-oriented (based on a specific problem shared by a well defined community) into being product-oriented (artists select a topic in advance, prepare a frame for the Forum Theatre and then perform it in front of different audiences), thus losing specificity, topicality and contact with community-based issues.

Some artists noticed the changes and lost interest in *kachahari natak*. A former Aarohan member distinguishes between the beginning, when doing *kachahari* was interesting and challenging because it was 'experimental' and involved coping with the 'unexpected', with the later stage when it became *bikase* (developmental). The metaphor suggests a similarity between professional street theatre and NGO project work. Another artist has defined the new working style as 'commercial': in fact, what the group offered to the audience was a pre-packed performance in which the audience could only participate in a limited and guided way.

Third, the audience agency is affected by such technical choices. In fact, not only does the workshop within a specific community create an environment from which a burning issue can emerge and be rehearsed; the workshop also allows some of the community members to familiarize with the dramaturgical techniques and later spur other audience to take part to the Forum Theatre performance as the distinction between specialized artists and community members is less clear-cut. By presenting a 'product' rather than a 'process', and allowing the audience to re-script the narration only from the critical point in which the *sutradhar* entered, artists maintained the means of theatrical production (cf. Jana Sanskriti organization and practise in Chapter one section 2.3 and Chapter six section 1).

Forth, the group decisions not to engage into post-performance activities with the audience or repeated performances in the same communities prevented *kachahari natak* from becoming a bridge between the fiction rehearse during the play and real life possibilities for changes. *Kachahari natak* became more a once off experience within the out-of-the-ordinary world of theatre rather than an instrument embedded in everyday life.

During post-performance discussions on a workshop-based *kachahari* play performed in the outskirts of the capital, Aarohan actors talked about the limits of a theatre group's involvement with social action and community work. Were they supposed to keep in contact with the community? Were they supposed to provide links with NGOs who could help the community face the problems discussed in the plays? For Sunil Pokharel, the group should do theatre, and only theatre. He was rather firm in his conviction, and this derived from his previous experiences. Other actors remarked that Gurukul could draw attention to a problem, and thus help in this way, but not get involved practically. Sunil

Pokharel reminded his actors that promises have to be fulfilled, and it is easy to create hopes with theatre. But hopes can easily turn into disillusionment. He emphasized the fact that artists should constantly think about their limitations as a theatre group. They can help by giving theatre skills and scripts, but nothing beyond this. Theatre according to Sunil Pokharel needs boundaries and limits. Yet, performances generate a great deal of information and knowledge about a problem, and knowledge triggers a sense of responsibility and different kinds of expectations, as Suresh's personal long-term involvement with landless children demonstrates.

While not willing to become a service-delivery 'NGO' and preferring to remain a theatre group (cf. Jana Sanskriti in Chapter six), Aarohan mainstreamed *kachahari* in a way that nonetheless recalls the secure and controlled environment of planned development, thus partly losing its methodological creative and liberating capacity.

Maoist drama and cultural performances offer an interesting challenge to theatre for social change practiced by Aarohan.

Kachahari theatre and in general Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed started from the attempt of creating a space of empowerment for the audience. However, when a group of spectators asked the theatre group to take up the guns and join them in fighting against the landlords, Boal and his actors felt their powerlessness as actors. Their guns were just props. Boal therefore questioned the theatrical techniques of what he called 'bourgeois theatre' and by breaking the barrier separating actors and audience and allowing the spect-actors to come on stage and perform their own version of the story, hoped that the fictional rehearsal on the stage could lead them to a real change in their own life (see Chapter one).

Maoist critique of bourgeois theatre is carried out on a totally different level. By using a very simple and traditional form of drama recalling bourgeois theatre in structure, based on a realistic reproduction of common experiences on stage, Maoist artists create an environment in which, though spectators do not become 'actors' on stage, spectators can indeed become 'actors' after the play is over by following the party. Guns are real guns and they can be held against the oppressors as Boal's peasants wished. Actors are not only actors but have multiple roles: they are actors, party members, and rebels (Mottin 2010). Maoist drama, directly calling people to join their struggle, is backed by a structure that allows the spectators 'stirred' by the play to continue their 'revolution' in real life.

It is worth discussing this issue of the context and politics of the performance in relation to a problem that emerged in *kachahari* drama. Spectators may have become actors during the *kachahari* play and the play may have become a 'rehearsal for revolution,' but when the play is over the audience is totally disconnected from the actors. The play remains a one-off show. However, if Maoist drama offers the possibility of continuing the rehearsal started onstage in real life, the kind of script

that is possible seems to be only 'one': that is the script presented by the play, by the actors, by the party. Revolutionary theatre uses the same methodology as bourgeois theatre to convey a different cultural message. However, although the message is top-down and unidirectional, actors are ready to share the 'responsibility' (see Chapter one section 2.2) of their message with the audience (see Chapter five sections 3 and 4).

In the next chapter, I will describe Aarohan Theatre group organizational development, the development of the artists' professional identities, as well as how they may relate to the standardization of *kachahari natak*. As in this chapter, I will also offer comparative examples from Maoists cultural groups and artists' experiences.

THE 'NORMALITY' OF THE SPECIAL: THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF ACTING

Theatrical performances are usually characterized by a time and space 'separation' from everyday life. They belong to leisure time and occur in specifically designed places (Turner 1982; Schechner 2002:61). Theatre artists often play around with the boundaries between life and theatre, between fiction and reality by setting performances in non-traditional, real-world locations (Schechner 1973), or by using participatory and interactive dramaturgical techniques (Boal 1979). Yet, at the end of the play, the 'boundaries' and the 'roles', which were reversed during the performance, become reinstated. Artists remain the 'specialists' of the theatre. For the audience the performance represents 'an experience' (Turner 1986)¹³⁸ and is anyway special because of its intensity. However, seen from the point of view of those who 'make' theatre, who live in and through theatre, theatre is very much embedded in everyday life, in its concerns and struggles. The dramatic metaphor is

¹³⁸ 'Mere experience is simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events. *An* experience, like a rock in a zen sand garden, stands out from the eventness of passing hours and years and forms what Dilthey called a 'structure of experience' (Turner 1986:35).

reversed: 'theatre is life', as artists often repeated in Gurukul. It is this perspective that I adopt in this chapter.

I will analyse the development of Aarohan Theatre Group as an organization, as well as the effort of artists to maintain and strengthen their professional identity. Towards the end of the chapter, I will briefly return to Maoist cultural workers to uncover their peculiar status as politically active artists. An in-depth analysis of Maoist cultural groups is outside the scope of this thesis. However, since both *kachahari natak* and Maoist theatre aim at bringing social change, I think the Maoist experience, as explicitly political and propagandistic exercises can serve as a counterpoint to the perspective and experiences of 'professional' theatre workers. In fact, I will conclude by taking up the question opened at the end of chapter four regarding the contested identity of Aarohan theatre artists as both professional artists and social activists. This discussion aims at highlighting how theatre work is not an activity 'outside-life' but rather is embedded in the wider historical, political and economic context and in personal and professional struggles. Despite the rhetoric of its publicly stated self-description, it seems that for Aarohan, artistic stage work was prioritized over *kachahari natak*.

The personal life stories and the distinctive environment of the Nepali theatre scene have influenced both the artistic and the organizational development of Aarohan theatre, as well as the development and establishment of Forum Theatre in Nepal (see Chapter four). The anthropology of organizations suggests that institutions are shaped by official and informal rules, which are monitored and controlled by leaders through 'conscious disciplinary process' and division of labour (Morgan 1990 cited in Gellner and Hirsch 2001:3). Organizations are represented as having a specific 'identity', a 'shared governing ethos' (Ibid. 4). Institutions also work in relation to the wider context that 'provide[s] them with the aims they pursue and set the limits to the way they may operate' (Ibid.). But how is identity and meaning negotiated within a theatre group as an organisation? Anthropological studies have questioned any monolithic view of organizations (Hilhorst 2003; Mosse 2005; Arce and Long 1992; Gellner and Hirsch 2001). Studying organizations requires first that their internal diversity is understood, and, second, that they are located historically. Like an NGO, a theatre company is a multi-faceted organization where different notions, identities and opinions coexist, compete and sometimes clash (cf. Hilhorst 2003). Secondly, this account needs to be considered as a situational, time-bound description of a critical stage in the process of development of an organization. My fieldwork coincided with a particular moment of transition in the establishment of Gurukul as an institution, and the transformation of Aarohan Theatre Group into a regular working company. Contradictions and instability are inevitable in many processes of creation. After the Group's first years of 'learning and experimenting' with Forum Theatre (2000-2004), which I have

reconstructed through actors' interviews, my own participant observation took place when Forum Theatre was adapted to the local working environment in a more systematic way, that incidentally also coincided with a period in which theatre itself as a genre was being promoted and given a greater role in the performing arts. In fact, between 2004 and 2006, Aarohan artists were engaged on several fronts. They gave continuity to the performance of artistic stage dramas at Sama Theatre Hall in Gurukul. They performed *kachahari natak* based on social issues in the streets and schools of Kathmandu as part of the development projects with MS Nepal and the National Theatre of Norway (Chapter four). They staged *loktantrik natak* on a voluntary basis during the public programmes for democracy and peace (see Chapter three). What is most important, I think, is that Aarohan artists were engaged in 'performing' their identity, showing that acting, however 'special', is indeed a respectable and rewarding profession. Let me start by discussing the actors' social status in Nepal, in order to explain how the institutionalization of the theatre group can be seen as a practice aiming to stabilize actors' identity.

1. From stigma to glamour

Although the origin of theatre is usually regarded as divine (see Chapter 1), the social position of performers in ancient Indian theatre was ambiguous (Iravati 2003; Gupta 1991). By forcing nymphs and singers to move down from heaven to earth and marry mortals, King Nahusa is said to have first established theatre (Gupta 1991:96). Yet, according to Bharata, actors mocked some holy sages and were cursed with the loss of their status, becoming *Sudras* (ibid). Gupta suggests that this story explains why at the time of Bharata, 'actors as a class had become notorious (*nirbrahmanya*) and their unclean habits (*sudracara*) were detested and shunned by refined society (*nirahuta*). When they died, their death was not mourned' (ibid.).

Different classical texts mention the poor respectability and low social status usually assigned to actors. For example, Sailusa, an actor in the *Ramayana*¹³⁹, is discovered prostituting his wife (Gupta, ibid.). The *Arthashastra*¹⁴⁰ warns against building pleasure houses or *natyasalas* for *natas* or *nartakas*, that is 'instrumentalists, reciters of stories and actors', inside the villages to avoid the risk

¹³⁹ The Sanskrit epic attributed to the poet Valmiki and an important part of the Hindu canon dated variously from 500 to 100 BCE.

¹⁴⁰ A Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy, attributed to Kautilya (Chanakya) usually dated 4th century BCE (Mabbet 1964)

of hampering the work of the inhabitants (Ibid.). Similarly, Manu¹⁴¹ condemns the profession, prohibits Brahmans from becoming actors (Ibid.) and even from accepting food from actors (Baumer and Brandon 1992:363). However, illicit relations with an actor's wife were punished with a minor penalty on account of actors' readiness to give their wives away for profit' (Baumer and Brandon 1992, ibid.). Manu grouped actors with wrestlers and boxers, while actresses were considered courtesans (Ibid.). Yet, artists were also often dialectically linked to powerful people, such as kings or dramatists. Bharata himself, the alleged founder of the *Natyashastra*¹⁴², is ranked as a Muni that is a holy sage. Urvashi, a divine nymph, was believed to be an actress (Baumer and Brandon 1992:364). The powerful despised performance artists but were at the same time fascinated by them and needed them to enhance their prestige.

Beyond mythology, the contrasted nature of the actors' profession, despised on the one hand, and yet indispensable for various reasons, including ideological legitimization through performances of mythological and other power-validating narratives, is also evident in the practical experience of contemporary South Asian popular theatre artists (Seizer 2000; 2005; Hansen 1992; Mehrotra 2006). In Nepal, artists from low castes are usually responsible for the singing and dancing at Hindu religious rituals and festivals. This forms part of their traditional social role and occupation. For example, the Damai are a caste of tailor-musicians who perform in a musical ensemble called the *pancai baja* which includes shawms, drums, cymbals and trumpets. They are responsible for creating an auspicious atmosphere during religious rituals, weddings, and secular processions (Tingey 1994). Members of the Gaine caste play the *sarangi*¹⁴³ to entertain local villagers narrating the joys and pain of everyday life (Weisethaunet 1998), while Badi women traditionally entertained high caste audiences with their dances (Cox 1982).¹⁴⁴ Amatya (1983) argues that with the end of the Rana rule in 1951, the performing arts gradually lost their caste-restricted rigidity and was opened up as a free enterprise or profession. Although descendants of some traditional musicians have indeed now become professional musicians, the background of most senior theatre actors is just the opposite. They are Brahmin-Chettri. This suggests that modern Nepali theatre does not grow out of local caste and ethnic traditions, but rather is the property of the high caste elite. In this it resembles Nepali

¹⁴¹ *Manu Smriti* (Laws of Manu) is a work of Hindu law, containing rules and codes of conduct for individuals and communities. Some of these laws codify the Hindu caste system. It is usually dated around 1st century CE.

¹⁴² Chicago ethnosociologists such as McKim Marriott (1976) argue that people and their occupations, 'the actor' and 'the act' are mutually constituted; that is to say that a caste-specific occupation, like acting/performing in this case is done by those with some innate propensity, whose substance predisposes them to such work that would be harmful for others. This position has been critiqued by Good (1982).

¹⁴³ A musical instrument similar to a violin.

¹⁴⁴ Most of the literature available focuses on Badi women as commercial sex workers and just mention their role of entertainers in passing. The change from dancers to prostitutes is said to have taken place in the last 50 years as a result of socio-political changes (Pigg and Pike 2004).

literature (Hutt, personal communication). The conversion of traditional caste-specific performers into theatre actors suggested by Amatya did not really occur. Most of the artists performing in theatre do not come from families having performing art as their caste occupation. Moreover, my informants rejected 1951 (the end of Rana rule) as a significant date in this regard.

What I found from interviews was that many actors, originally from rural areas, had been fascinated by the traditional performances they saw during festivals in their villages. As a result, they participated in theatre at school and in local cultural groups. Most of the actors involved in professional theatre who are now in their 40s or 50s identify the theatre that was popular among university students in the 1980s as a reference point (see Chapter two). Retrospectively, they regard the changes introduced by Balkrishna Sama as real innovations (Malla 1980; see Chapter one). In short, present day theatre artists connect themselves far less to folk drama than to a theatre with palace origins, 'vernacularized', 'villagized' and politicized by Balkrishna Sama (Ibid.), as well as the politically activist street and stage theatre which was rich during the Panchayat period (see Chapter two).

Although contemporary Nepali theatre relies on folk elements and a continuum is certainly present between different forms, traditional performers and theatre actors seem to belong to two different categories of artists. In contrast to folk performances where roles are strictly scripted and caste-based (see Chapter one on Kartik dance), in modern theatre no such family tradition exists and so far interest in theatre does not stretch beyond two generations within the same family. However, despite actors' appealing for an 'intellectual' stage tradition, as I will detail below, theatre is commonly associated with popular street theatre.

Conversely, among actors a pattern of conflict with their families is common; parents are rarely happy with their children embarking on a theatrical career. Caste matters. Most of the actors involved in modern theatre that I interviewed belong to Brahman-Chettri families.

	AAROHAN MANAGEMENT	AAROHAN FIRST INTAKE	AAROHAN SECOND INTAKE	SEN CHYANG CULTURAL GROUP
BAHUN- CHETTRI,	Pokharel, Sharma, Bhatta,	Nepal, Chand, Pudasaini, Ghimire, Sapkota Pokharel (3), Malla, Karki, Giri	Dhakal, Khatiwada, KC	Bohora, Pant, Bista, Khadka, Bogati,
NEWAR			Tamrakar, Shakya	
OTHER			Chaudhary, Rai,	Bom, Lama (8),

JANAJATI			Karna	Thami (2), Tamang (5), Gurung, Ghising, Hitang, Rai
LOWER CASTES				Budha, Kathyat, Nepali, Prajapati, BK,

Table 5.1. Caste chart of the members of the Aarohan Theatre Group and Sen Chyang Cultural Group. In brackets, the number of group members with the same family name.

Sunil Pokharel explains that the caste composition of modern theatre can be explained by the fact that, especially in the past, Brahman-Chettri had more access to education, which provided the link to theatre performed at university. When the second intake of Gurukul students was selected, the management on purpose provided seats to artists coming from non Bahun-Chattri backgrounds. According to many artists, theatre provided young people from strict Brahmin families with a space of freedom. There is, therefore, a substantial difference between performing by birth and by choice: acting by choice involved a departure from family expectations and a degree of rebellion. Despite changes over the last 25 years ago, especially in big cities, that makes it easier for young people to choose an acting career, Nisha Sharma Pokharel believes the stigma still exists, although the connotation may have changed somewhat, measured by the standards of education and the commensurate and desirable careers that could have been pursued, rather than the effect on caste status:

Still now, people think that this profession is not good, for girls and for boys, because if you have nothing to do, or if you could not study further and you are weak in studies, then you just jump into theatre because in theatre you don't need anything. This is what people still now think, though slowly it's changing. (Interviewed in English, November 2006).

I will now detail the contrasting pressures artists faced in pursuing their careers by drawing on the life stories of some of Aarohan Theatre artists, in particular Kamal, Aruna, Rajkumar, Nisha and Bhola.

In the rural areas artists were mocked at. Kamal, an actor in Gurukul in his late 20s, remembers that when he started doing theatre in his village in Morang, people teased him, calling him 'hero, eh hero', with contempt. Actors explain that since good dancers sometimes show girlish behaviour, people mock them. Kamal was taunted, 'Oh, he's a dancer, show us a dance!' Acting and dancing are perceived as a continuum. The stigma can go as far as making it difficult for actors to find a wife. Actors have to travel a lot and are often far from home. So women become suspicious, and

some actors admitted that sometimes these suspicions were justified. This distrust adds to the financial insecurity usually associated with the profession, which is the main worry for parents. For example, when Kamal met the father of the woman who would become his wife, he was asked about his job. When Kamal replied that he was an actor, the man rephrased his question, 'For food, what do you do?' Therefore, while enjoying recognition and success in the capital, actors from rural areas may have to cope with a different identity when returning home. An urban-rural divide in attitudes and background is quite clearly discernible.

Rajkumar, another actor from Aarohan, is from Nuwakot. His desire since adolescence was to act, but his family was vehemently opposed to the idea. He had asked his parents for NRs 2,000 to stage a play and start a theatre group in his area, promising to return NRs.40,000 within a month. He spent NRs. 800 for the rehearsal room, NRs. 500 for travelling and the rest for food. Rajkumar's intentions did not, however, materialize the way he had anticipated as he had not properly managed the expenses. Moreover, many extra expenses arose. The initial 10 people working for the play became 25 by the end of the project, bringing in more bills and mouths to feed. Rajkumar remembers:

It was so horrible, my parents hated me...somehow I lost my relationship with my parents. I was a refugee. After that they also told me to leave the country, otherwise to do something else here, but not theatre. In my heart there was a pain, about these NRs 10,000 loss. (Interviewed in English, January 2006)

Despite the hardship, Rajkumar returned to Kathmandu and looked for other jobs, but kept theatre as his central focus. He believes his parents' concerns go beyond the financial problems usually associated with theatre. He is now a renowned theatre artist and has travelled to different countries to perform, yet

They are suggesting [that I] leave this [job], they don't like it...I can't really say what the matter is but I can imagine that in our culture... we [he is from a Bahun caste] can't use leather things. Dancing, singing, belong to leather groups. The madal is made of leather. It comes from buffalo. It's illegal for a Brahmin [to touch it]. So, culturally, we're not allowed to do theatre. The other thing is that the state of theatre is very bad. Nobody is earning a lot of money, [and] becoming well off through theatre. In modern times, if you are educated, and you can't earn money, it's not good. So they are still suggesting [that I] leave. I'm not interested in showing them my performances. They have never come here... (Ibid.)

If acting is not considered a good profession for men, mainly because of economic instability, it has been an even harder choice for women, especially in rural areas because of the social stigma attached to the profession. Theatre was, and still is, in many villages, considered as an 'entertainers'

domain. It is linked to the courtesans of the Rana palaces on the one hand (see Chapter one), and on the other with the travelling Parsi theatre troupes, whose erotic plays attract a mainly male audience. As Sunil Pokharel explains:

In the Tarai, there was a famous form called Nautanki, from India. Academically, it was Parsi theatre. Nautanki was from Uttar Pradesh, somehow they mixed up. They were professional theatre companies, travelling theatre [companies] They used to come from India, [they were] second, third-grade touring Nautanki companies. Then a dance, a bit erotic, and then the audience offered some money and they announced: 'Mr Phalano gave 20 rupees to Miss Bala' or something like that. And then this Miss Bala, the actress, did doo doo doo [he shakes body and head] at the rhythm. And then 'Thank you' [bowing] [laughs]. At the end they tried to encourage the erotic thing in the audience based on some myth or hero. That is theatre in the Tarai. So you can understand why people react in that way (Interviewed in English, November 2006).

Basanta Bhatta, one of the founding members of Aarohan, recounts that when he started acting in Biratnagar in the early 1980s, theatre was not regarded as 'good' for women. Doing theatre in fact, requires interacting with men and often having to come back late at night after rehearsals. He explains that because of the strict social rules that prevented young boys and girls from meeting, theatre was sometimes used as a 'platform' where such meetings could take place. Once again the peculiar space occupied by theatre becomes evident, a place where social rules can be bent. Some senior actors believe that the theatrical space was 'misused' as a cover for romantic engagements by young people, telling their families they were attending rehearsals. Basanta remembers that sometimes just a month after being involved in theatre boys and girls got married, and so a negative impression of theatre and theatre people circulated within the community. Actors also pointed out that theatre was a space of freedom and it was common for young boys and girls who had grown up in a very strict environment to not have the necessary skills for coping with so much liberty.

As a result, male actors had to strike compromises with the families of actresses through complex negotiations mediated by means of cultural practices. For example, Sunil Pokharel recalls that when Basanta and Badri Adhikari went to speak with the families of actresses, they had to assume entire responsibility for the girls: 'the parents of the girls used to say 'if something happens, ... you have to marry her' (Interviewed in English, November 2006). They had to agree. Parents let daughters go if actors assured protection, that is, if the girls were not only going to be actresses but also 'sisters'. Basanta remembers that during Tihar, he had to visit many houses to receive Bhai Tika and thus renew the fraternal bond with the actresses of his group: '*Tika* is powerful for human beings...' he explained, 'they did not believe me, they believed in *tika*' (Interviewed in English, October 2005).

The 1980s were characterised by a shortage of actresses. This affected both the choice of theatre productions and the dramaturgy. Ashesh Malla, a playwright and director of Sarwanam, reveals how the absence of female characters in his early plays was not the result of a deliberate choice but a necessity.

However, the stigma attached to actresses changes with historical period, location and social background. Aruna is an actress in Gurukul, now in her late 20s. She started acting when she was 13. She was attracted to the theatre by dramas that were performed during the festival of Dashain that took place in her village near Janakpur. At the end of the plays, actors were much admired and congratulated by the audience. She joined the Dashain plays through the local youth club. After attending a workshop conducted by Sunil Pokharel to train local groups, Aruna started travelling to perform street theatre on development issues. Her group used to perform 60-90 plays per month, two to three plays a day. They returned home once a month. They performed, ate, and then walked to the next village. The group included 10 members, only 2 of whom were female. Aruna remembers that people in her village did not like her profession because 'boys and girls stay outside their homes, play drama together and may get married'. She remembers it was very difficult to perform in the Tarai:

Their girls don't speak a lot .. and have to cover their face with the sari. If you go there to play drama it's a bit bad. They didn't give us the rooms, they kept us outside and we had to sleep outside. But in some villages they called the girls and they said that they should be like Aruna. It was a bit difficult. Now it's less. (Interview, October 2005).

Aruna points out that as actresses, they were aware of the villagers' prejudices and avoided talking openly with boys to prevent gossip. Aruna remarks that if a girl behaved 'badly', if she acted in dramas and got married, let alone married someone from a different caste, 'the road' for other girls doing theatre would be blocked. Families would refuse to give their daughters permission to join theatre.

However, the story of Nisha, a leading theatre artist in her late 30s, provides an exception. Born in a Bahun-Newar family in Kathmandu, Nisha started acting in Aarohan when she was very young, following her sisters. Nisha explained that her family has always supported her artistic career. She attributes this to the specific background of her family. Her mother is a Newar and being so is, according to her, more open-minded. She was given permission to enter into an inter-caste marriage with a Brahmin. Besides, artists frequently gathered in her family home to perform. Nisha's marriage to Sunil Pokharel certainly facilitated her continuing career. Sarita, another actress from Aarohan Theatre in her late 20s, also from Kathmandu, says she has also been supported by her family in her choice, thus suggesting an urban-rural difference in the acceptance of the profession.

Marriage is often the reason why actresses are compelled to leave the stage and remain at home. Families and husbands are still the bearers of traditional Hindu values, which do not regard women's presence on stage positively. Aruna attributes her own capacity for remaining on the stage after marriage to the fact that her husband is also an actor in Aarohan, and that his family is connected to Sunil Pokharel. What emerges from the actors' stories is their struggle to change existing views about their profession.¹⁴⁵ They feel this is achieved whenever their work allows them to sustain themselves financially, when it is publicly recognized by the media, or legitimized by tours abroad. Yet, many actresses complain that actors themselves are the first people who endorse and reinforce such social stigma towards actresses. While on stage male actors are keen to portray and question gender discrimination and talk in a very open and progressive way. When the time of choosing a life partner comes, they prefer girls outside the theatre world. Questioned directly, Sunil jokingly admits 'there is a famous saying by my teacher in Delhi, that's the normal attitude: 'you would like a very advanced girlfriend and a very domestic wife'. That's true, in a way, even for very modern men, that's the general truth... (Interviewed in English, November 2006).

If marrying an actor gives actresses social security and allows them to continue their work in theatre, some actresses complain that family relations impinge upon casting and fair competition among female artists. Some artists regard casting in theatrical productions as biased. Some actresses blame directors for selecting their wives or girlfriends for the main roles and neglecting the high skills of other artists. Besides, actresses are usually paid less than men with the same experience and popularity. Despite talking about equality and staging plays that herald women's rights, daily practices indicate gender discrimination within the theatre world itself. Theatre has not reached the level of professionalism¹⁴⁶ which ensures fair competition. The wider context also makes it harder for actresses not backed by networks to prove their professional qualities. For different reasons, such as lack of training and a shortage of financial resources, theatre productions are still often 'family productions'. The joint effort of husband, wife and relatives in theatre assures working continuity and provides sustainability to many artistic projects.

¹⁴⁵ Film acting is usually considered a more prestigious profession because there are more financial rewards. Yet, very often film actresses appear on screen and in newspapers (like *Saptahik*, *Kamana*) in scanty dresses and overtly sexual poses, in contrast to theatre actresses. This leads to the assumption that the restraints on theatre are due more to economic than moral reasons.

¹⁴⁶ By 'professionalism' I mean the ability to earn a living by acting in an environment where competition among artists and group is based on artistic quality rather than on social networks.

2. Gurukul foundation myths

Gurukul School of Theatre is the first independent theatre school in Nepal and aims at professionalizing theatre acting (see Chapter one). There are two themes I want to explore in this section. The first is the Gurukul foundation myths that emerge from actors' narratives and from Aarohan Theatre promotional literature. The second deals with the teaching 'tradition' within which the theatre school inserted itself. Reviving a traditional, 'pre-Western style of education', with specific roles and practices, was not without consequences, as I will detail later.

Foundations myths are at the heart of 'organized groups', be they nations, dynasties, empires (Rippin and Fleming 2006) or religious groups (Michael 1983). Similarly, business foundation myths lie at the heart of corporate culture (Ibid.). Although organizations may not consciously refer to these archetype myths, they can be used as a lens through which to study organizational claims to legitimacy and autonomy in pursuing their agendas (Ibid.). Some key narrative elements characterize Western foundation myths: the outsider or wanderer, the dreamer or visionary, and the establishment of a superior culture (Ibid.).

The beginning of Gurukul is characterized by recovering the wild. The forest is a particularly powerful symbol, the location of the ascetic, of the transcendent, but also of the wild itself, of the uncivilized. In the case of Gurukul, what was carried out was a 'purification' of the forest. Rajkumar recalls that the tiny hill where Gurukul would be established was at first desolate, 'just a structure and a forest, a place for drug users'. So, the actors themselves cleaned the place, put in sanitation, fixed the house, added a canteen, and turned the building into a theatre hall dedicated to Balkrishna Sama. The theme of purification can be perceived also in the actors' effort to 'sanitize' the 'theatrical genre' and make it acceptable to society. This is ritually evident during the *bhai tika* practices carried out by actors to safeguard actresses' sexuality; as mentioned in section 5.1.

Another recurrent narrative emphasises risks and struggles, a sort of journey into the unknown aimed at bringing a stigmatized artistic form back into society. Bamboo, metal, lights, bricks and cement, were all bought on credit. Not knowing the outcome of the project, the group agreed to rent the land for three years. Different artists recall that the group managed to pay the early expenses by donations from well-wishers and friends, or by credit. The mayor of Kathmandu, Keshave Sthapit offered to pay for the rent of the land for the first six months. At the beginning, the group paid NRs. 10,000 rent for the building and 7 *ropanis* for the land. The rent was raised to NRs. 60,000 in 2005-06, creating problems of sustainability. For the first two years students received NRs. 3,000 a month from the school as a scholarship for living expenses, and after graduating they got a monthly

salary of NRs. 5,000. The actors used the money they earned from a radio serial to build the centre and pay the scholarships. Six months later, the mayor lost his position and the group's funding was cut. Rajkumar remembers the months of hardship that followed: 'no scholarships, no food, no money to pay the land rent'. Because of financial difficulties, the group turned to street theatre. Some NGOs commissioned projects that helped the group survive. Sunil Pokharel pawned his wife Nisha's jewellery and used the money to pay the rent. Actors themselves collected their personal savings to support Gurukul. After six months, Sthapit became mayor of the capital again and continued helping them. The group entered a partnership with MS Nepal, a Danish INGO, and survival became easier. They also started performing proscenium plays at Sama Theatre Hall with great dedication, 'even when only two people were in the audience' (Rajkumar, informal conversation, November 2004). 'We had nothing but crazy minds' comments Rajkumar with pride.

The third narrative *topoi* is the popular foundation tale of the dream/vision. In this case, the dream has a particular connotation: it is an eleventh hour dream. Nisha recounts that the hardships of the 1990s, the economic problems and criticism about their handling of donors' money, the lack of audience and thus the forecast of a grim future had made Sunil depressed. Nisha remembers she was also disheartened, and they thought about moving to the US where her sister was living. At the very last moment, when Nisha had already sent the certificates for their visa, Sunil asked her to give him another two years so that he could try to open a theatre school. Nisha remembers Sunil saying:

'If I succeed ok, if I won't, then I will do whatever you would like'. I said ok, because for many years I followed him, and supported him in what he said. And two more years were nothing in comparison. So I said ok, let's see for two years. We got this place [Gurukul], we called the students and said let's see for two years. They also wanted to jump. If we succeed ok, if we won't we will go back to what was there before. But it's not happening.... God is with us. The situation is now good (Interviewed in English, November 2007).

Gurukul was a dream not only for Sunil. Many of the actors/students who accepted what they describe as a challenge left their jobs and invested their whole life in the group. Sunil had met most of the first-intake of students at the acting course run at the Cultural Corporation and Nepal Academy. If Nisha describes the establishment of Gurukul as a 'jump' into the unknown, a leap of faith, the actors' response was like the reply to a 'call' from their guru. They left what they were doing to follow Sunil.

Rajkumar quit his work in Nuwakot District. He was performing street plays for a local NGO. The group was getting Nrs 3,000 a play, which allowed them to survive, but acting was becoming difficult because of the increasing intensity of the People's War. Other actors, such as Rajan, and Kamal left their jobs in commercial offices. Anoj was an accountant at a hotel and left his job to take up Aarohan administration. The only actor who did not quit his job was Mani who still holds a

government post but manages to get enough free time to rehearse and participate at workshops, meetings, and performances. The other actors were not then working permanently. For example, Aruna's parents wanted her to quit theatre. So after travelling with street theatre (subsection 5.1.1), she was sent to Kathmandu to study at Padma Kanya College, a women only campus. But she continued her involvement in theatre. Her didi, a relative with whom she was living in Kathmandu, got angry so she left her house. She joined classes at the Nepal Academy where Sunil was teaching while continuing with street theatre and acting in radio dramas. When she joined Gurukul, her mother was not happy but accepted her decision. Her father was very upset. He only spoke to her again two years later after the success of *Agniko Katha* (Fire in the Monastery).¹⁴⁷

Bhola's story is worth looking at in more depth. He demonstrates a high degree of self-reflexivity in explaining the danger involved in his life-choice, describing it in terms that sound almost like a 'mission'. Bhola, in his late 20s, has been engaged in theatre since he was young. The cultural programmes performed in his village in Hetauda during Dashain had captivated him. He joined the plays during Krishna Jatra¹⁴⁸ and then acted in Taranga Sanskritik Parivar's¹⁴⁹ street plays for many years. He then joined Gurukul with the first intake. He says that when he performed street plays he managed to get enough money to live. Through the money they earned in street plays, artists could also buy the equipment to stage proscenium plays. However, life for actors is financially hard:

From an economic point of view, if I go home and leave theatre, I have a truck, if I work with it I can earn NRs. 8-10,000 a month easily. But here, I get only NRs. 5,000 a month. But this is the job that interests me. I have a brother, other relatives. But I don't have chance to meet them. I go to my house once or twice a year, for Dashain or once more in between if there is some work. That's why, even though I am having more difficulties, I am here. It is my desire. If I really want to earn money, then there are lots of other jobs that I could do, not only drama. I'm the son of a farmer. I can work in the fields very easily. I have been doing it before. I have ideas in business as well. I've also done it before. What I feel is that I am here only because of interest, not because others forced me, just because of my inner desire. Staying with your own interest you have to bear losses, pain, sometimes we get happiness. It's another thing. If other people eat a rice pudding and you eat *ghundruk* out of your own interest, it's more satisfactory. If you eat it with your own satisfaction, it will be tastier, that's what I think (Interview, December 2005).

Although his friends support his choice, Bhola feels the burden of responsibilities and duties towards his family. His brother often suggests that he go back home and work in the fields where he can earn enough money to survive. However Bhola, whilst being aware of the high personal risks, remains

¹⁴⁷ The literary translation of *Agniko Katha* is 'The Story of Fire'. However, the play is normally translated in English and cited as 'Fire in the Monastery'.

¹⁴⁸ A religious festival celebrating God Krishna.

¹⁴⁹ A theatre group specialized in street theatre based in Hetauda, Bhola's town of origin.

committed to his passion. His family asks him why he is not getting married. Bhola is aware of the responsibilities of running a family and having children, of the fact that, should someone get sick, he may not have the money to buy medicines. Besides, in Nepal, wives traditionally do not work after marriage, which makes his position even less stable. Bhola saw his future in a rather bleak way. I felt uncomfortable at the end of our interviews because Bhola was very serious in his accounts. Although he felt positive with regard to the development of theatre in Nepal, he was more skeptical about his own future. He says there may even be a day when his family will not talk to him any more because he is not making money and he may end up begging in Pashupatinath. On the one hand he is proud of following his passion, on the other he suffers in silence the hardships of his professional choice.

The three different accounts indicated the lack of a favourable context for theatre, in both personal and family experiences, and in the wider social environment. The group's formation is portrayed almost in religious terms, as a leap of faith towards Sunil's vision, inspired by their own passion for theatre. Their risks were justified because they were building a new 'profession' as well as renewing theatre art in Nepal. Actors' narratives about the beginning of Gurukul are full of the emotion, the enthusiasm, the pride and the contradictions that accompany the manifestation of a collective dream through risks and personal challenges. The actors of the first in-take remember with nostalgia and affection the initial period of struggle, which created a cohesive group, strengthened by the communal system. While listening to the tales of the first in-take of students, Pashupati, a student from the second, regrets having missed that closeness and sharing of experience with Sunil and other senior actors.

The second issue of this section concerns the organizational model of the theatre school. As the brochure quoted in chapter one highlights, Gurukul's structure is an adaptation of the traditional system of the *guru-kula*. *Guru-kula* means 'the house of the guru'. In ancient India it was the locus of artistic apprenticeship, both in dance and music (Antze 1991; Prickett 2007). In fact, the student was customarily incorporated into the household of the guru so that he could live in constant one-to-one contact with the teacher and thus learn as much as possible by practice and intuition (Antze, *ibid.*). For example, Kalakshetra, the dance school founded in Madras by Rukmini Devi in 1936 was devised according to the principles of the *guru-kula*. It was a boarding school where students and teachers lived and worked together for a minimum of four years. While undergoing training, they served the teacher (Antze 1991; Zarrilli 2001). Antze reveals that for most of the contemporary dance students the *guru-kula* belongs to an idealized past as a long residence with the guru, more than a few months, is not feasible in contemporary society (*ibid.*). The *guru-kula* presumes a specific apprenticeship style named *guru-shishya parampara* (guru-disciple tradition) that I will explain later when looking more deeply into Gurukul's organization. Gurukul's real-life model is the National School

of Drama (NSD) in India, where Sunil studied. NSD is a 'cult' in Nepal. Artists talk about NSD as a dream school, an ideal school that can legitimize the 'professionalism' of an actor. Nepali theatre groups compete to enter its annual festival. The main newspapers in both Nepali and English cover the event. Participation is a source of prestige. In fact, the few Nepali artists¹⁵⁰ who attended NSD are usually considered the authoritative figures in theatre. Describing the similarities between Gurukul and NSD, Rajkumar explained that they 'live and work in theatre day and night to develop theatre in Nepal... it has to be the whole of your life here [in the theatre]', (Informal conversation, December 2004).

During the two-year course offered by Gurukul, the students lived in the hostel inside the compound and ran the centre themselves. They were taught by local artists and visiting teachers from abroad who conducted workshops at the school.¹⁵¹ The first in-take of students started in 2002. The second started in the summer of 2004 and finished in 2006. The school had a loose curriculum and was in the process of getting affiliation from a Nepali university for providing a graduate course in theatre. The school offered students different classes: ¹⁵² acting, yoga, martial arts, music and *charya* sdance.¹⁵³ During the period of my fieldwork, dance, martial arts and yoga were scheduled in a strict early morning routine, forming the core and imparting continuity to the teaching. The rest of the classes took place intermittently. Late morning and afternoon were often dedicated to *kachahari* performances, workshops or rehearsals of stage dramas. Classes were partly paid for by the management and were partly volunteered by the teachers and this created problems of discontinuity. During the period of my fieldwork, I observed that the core of the teaching was passed on practically through rehearsals of plays.¹⁵⁴ However, the *guru-kula* system was modernized and adapted to Gurukul. The major departure from the tradition consisted in the fact that only the students lived inside the school while the teachers and married senior actors lived in private houses outside the compound, thus breaking with prescribed commonality.

Discipline is a typical feature of the *guru-kula*. In Gurukul there were no written regulations. I came to know most of the rules by observing practice. Discipline with regard to movement, to the body - particularly with regard to the actresses 'image', and to male-female interaction was most

¹⁵⁰ Apart from Sunil Pokharel, Anup Baral also graduated at NSD. The third Nepali graduate is Subarna Thapa who lives and works in Paris.

¹⁵¹ Even in India the *guru-kula* has evolved (Antze 1991). Even the traditional and rigorous *kathakali* training is transmitted in modern institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam to full time students who live in the institute in very simple manner and receive a subsistence stipend rather than on one-to-one basis (Zarrilli 2001:69).

¹⁵² Courses stopped in 2006.

¹⁵³ Newar classical dance.

¹⁵⁴ Three students left the school because of several personal reasons. A common dissatisfaction, however, was that they were not learning much from this kind of structural organization.

evident. Since the management¹⁵⁵ was responsible for the security of the students, actors could only go out of the compound after having received permission from either Basanta or Sunil. They were required to mark their exit and entrance times on a register. While actors seemed to have more freedom, actresses from the first intake were seldom allowed out in the evening. Some rules were aimed at safeguarding artistic performance. For example, everybody had to be inside the compound by 9 PM, and lights had to be switched off by 10 PM. The wake up call for the first class was at 4.45 AM. The last class ended at 9 AM. Tacit rules governed the permissible interactions between actors. Although jokes and teasing are common, I was told that it was not good for male and female artists to sit and talk with one another for a long time in the open space of the courtyard. Similar rules governed the internal space of the dormitories. Interestingly, I only heard about a rule prohibiting males from entering females' rooms after the end of the first part of my fieldwork when I had moved out of Gurukul. In the period when I lived in the female dormitory, it was normal for male and female artists to move around the rooms, to chat, sing, or watch movies in the evening in the common room. The atmosphere was very friendly and all the artists seemed to be rather comfortable with the mixed gender situation and simultaneously respectful of the privacy of each other's spaces. Whenever partner groups arrived from the village, they were accommodated in the two guest rooms on the floor where several people could sleep. But the evenings were often spent singing and dancing together in what seemed a natural way. In fact, when the management left in the late afternoon, usually around 6-7 PM, the place was more relaxed after 'the management' had left.

Actresses were prohibited from wearing revealing clothes, and in the first stage of my residence in Gurukul, a tacit dress code forbade the wearing of jeans and T-shirts. The reason was first of all practical. While rehearsing and doing other kinds of work in the compound, loose clothes like track-suits or *kurta surwal* were certainly more comfortable. Yet, actresses were careful not to wear tight or sleeveless tops because 'Sunil Sir did not like it'. *Kurta surwal* was also the proper dress required to perform *kachahari* in the streets or in schools and communities. Artists came from different backgrounds and some found it hard to comply with Gurukul's rules. For example, one day an actress, from a well-off family in Dharan showed me her new pair of sandals inside the bedroom. She put them on and started to walk as if on a catwalk. Then she bitterly commented she would never be able to go out and wear them, so she has to do it inside the room. At home, in fact, she enjoyed much more freedom than in Gurukul. The situation was hard for her. Such restrictions would disappear in the later stage of my fieldwork, from 2006 onwards.

¹⁵⁵ By 'management' I mean the group of senior artists who shared the highest responsibilities within the group during the period of my fieldwork, that is Sunil Pokharel, Nisha Sharma Pokharel and Basanta Bhatta.

For the first period of my fieldwork the internal space of the theatre in Gurukul could be conceptualized as a highly regulated and 'controlled space'. In order to challenge traditional social taboos against theatre, and to allow for male and female artists to live and work in the same space, Gurukul management established conservative rules governing both relations and attitudes. Their strict control over artists' bodies and interactions was not dissimilar to the dictates of 'traditional' Hindu society. In fact, it was the actors' identity and profession that they were constructing and making acceptable to their society.

Let me sum up the key points raised in this section. The foundation of Gurukul represented a key moment in the lives of senior artists. It was also a turning point in the students' lives as joining the group inevitably meant challenging both their families' and their cultures' general distrust of theatre. The foundation of the school is talked about as a struggle, against the forest and against their culture, but the prize at stake was following inner passion and making theatre their life. The school system was inspired by a traditional institution, the *guru-kula*, and adapted to the local environment. Regulations governed the communal life in Gurukul, particularly with regard to the body, as if in an attempt to legitimise theatre by buying into the values of the Hindu environment that condemned it. Living and working together created a strong emotional bond between the group members and their place. I will now describe how the group developed into a theatre organization and how this impacted on artists' daily lives.

2.1. 'Institutionalizing' the theatre group

What are the practical differences between a 'theatre group' and a 'theatre organization'? What are the problems involved in 'becoming' an organization or an institution? Being an institution seems to be at odds with the ideals of setting up a 'theatrical community'. Introducing 'structures' seems to clash against the creativity involved in the crafting of a theatrical piece. The *Théâtre du Soleil*¹⁵⁶ is a theatre company that in spirit is close to how Aarohan Theatre defines itself, that is, an open space for theatre workers to produce committed art. Commentators report that they struggled not to become an 'institution', despite its worldwide reputation, in order to maintain their identity of 'difference' (Bradby 2002:113). Located in a former munitions warehouse, their hall is far from any

¹⁵⁶ The *Théâtre du Soleil* is a company of around 50 people from a wide variety of origins and backgrounds, founded and directed by Ariane Mnouchkine in 1964 in Paris (Bradby 2002).

theatre hall in the city centre. The area is devised as an open space, where there is no distinction between audience and actors (audience can see actors making up before the performance and buy home-made food). There is neither a system of seats reservation, nor socially stratified seating. Their working methodology is unique. The company follows an austere way of working, and is run in an 'egalitarian' manner, sharing different domestic chores, like DIY and cooking. The director is paid the same salary as the rest of the company and engages with the others in the life of the group. Paradoxically, the group is an example of a 'powerful director' using collaborative methods' (Ibid. 118). For example, plays are never cast in advance so that all actors may try the roles, but at the end the director is the only person who makes final decisions (Ibid. 120). Leadership conflicts are common in theatre collectives. For example, when in 1970 Ron Davis left the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Joan Holden, who replaced him as artistic director explained: 'There was a big fight over how much authority the director should have. People wanted more democracy. Davis made all the artistic decisions, and people wanted to have a lot more to say' (van Erven 1988:32).

Let me first define the context in which Aarohan developed into a more structured organization, in order to highlight the tensions that appeared during my fieldwork. Subsequently, I will also connect this process to the evolution of *kachahari* theatre production. The year 2005, when I was doing my fieldwork, appears to have been an important landmark. In its 25 year-old history, Aarohan Theatre expanded from a loose meeting point of actors, working sporadically together for specific theatrical productions, into a stable group based in a specific location with the creation of Gurukul in 2002. At the beginning of 2004, a partnership with MS Nepal (Jan 2004-Jan 2007) provided both funding for street performances and for the support of a foreign development adviser to strengthen the administration and support theatrical activities. The project focused on institutional capacity building. It was to be achieved through strengthening the organizational structure of the group, defining more precisely the staff roles and responsibilities, developing strategic plans, and networking with local theatre groups. The purpose was to make the group financially self-reliant and develop theatre methodologies for social change and democracy. On the artistic side, since the beginning of 2005, a partnership with the National Theatre of Norway has allowed the group to perform 10 *kachahari* plays a month, adding to the 4-7 commissioned by MS Nepal. External support from the National Theatre of Norway also meant an increase in material facilities, technical resources and made international exchanges available to the group. For example, they received second-hand stage lights sufficient for two halls, 'Light Design', 'Art Management' and 'Directing' workshops facilitated by Norwegian specialists, a play directed by a Norwegian director in Nepal, a month-long workshop in Norway offered to a Nepali artist, and a generator to prevent performance interruptions

during the frequent power cuts that afflict the capital. Besides, from February 2005, the group started performing stage plays regularly (see Chapter two) and received an overwhelming response from the audience. Throughout 2005 and 2006, the group experienced a sudden development in terms of technical skills, logistical resources, publicity and marketing, and in production management. Regular stage work continued with kachahari natak, as well as voluntary political theatre performances for public assemblies. This progression increased workloads for actors, who were engaged in performing, advertising the plays, and working in the organization and management of the school.

2.1. Re-inventing the modern guru

Gurukul was described by Sunil Pokharel as an 'open space' where all kinds of people, regardless of caste or class, could meet. In fact, it was an extraordinary gathering place for actors, poets, literati, and anybody interested in the arts. The cheap ticket prices, usually starting from NRs. 25 for students, NR. 50 or NRs. 100-200 a show, attracted both students and middle income people.¹⁵⁷ But despite the populist, anti-elistist and anti-hierarchical artistic and political credo, a clear system of hierarchies in everyday activities was clearly evident to an outsider. What I want to suggest in this section is that a hierarchy of power can be partly ascribed to the particular cultural tradition in which the school inserted itself, the *guru-kula*.

The word *guru* comes from Sanskrit. 'Gu' signifies 'shadow/darkness' while the syllable 'ru' means 'the person who disperses it'. Therefore the guru is the person who disperses darkness (Antze, 1991; Prickett 2007:26). Literature on Indian classical dance and music is helpful to understand the guru's practical role in the arts. In traditional teaching, the *guru-shishya parampara*, 'guru-student (line of) tradition' suggests a particular relationship (Antze 1991; Prickett 2007). The guru is more than a preceptor for the student. He is like a second father because he gives birth to the artist in each of his or her students. The guru is placed at a higher level than a parent, at the same level as a god, and thus revered accordingly (Antze 1991). The role goes beyond the transmission of knowledge and invests the human development of the students (Antze, *ibid.*). The relationship is based on love, devotion and reverence (*Ibid.*). For example, Ravi Shankar places three central ideas at the heart of the Indian music tradition: the *guru*, *vinaya* that is 'humility tempered with love and

¹⁵⁷ For some people I talked to, NRs. 25 for a play was still a considerable amount of money. But NRs. 30-60 is also the price of a half-price morning film show in a hall in the outskirts of the capital, like Gopi Krishna in Gaushala, or Guna in Gwarko.

worship' and *sadhana* which means practice and discipline involving 'complete faithfulness to the guru's tradition and absolute obedience to his instructions in art and life' (Antze, 1991:31). All in all, the *guru-shishya parampara* results in an intimate yet hierarchical rapport rather than a meeting of friends or equals (Ibid.).

Any organization is defined by its rules, internal practices, and discursive repertoires (Gellner and Hirsch 2001; Hilhorst 2003). I will now describe how the traditional concept was practically adapted in Gurukul. I will first start by analysing the leadership that emerged and move later to the regulations. In Gurukul the traditional *guru-shishya* relationship was modified. Sunil removed the ritual formalities of the role and did not want his students to bow and touch his feet as many traditional teachers required (Antze 1991, Prickett 2007). Nonetheless the core spirit of the relationship remained, as *habitus* from actors' previous artistic experiences. It was renewed in public ceremonies. For example, during festivals celebrated in Gurukul, the photographic portraits of actors and playwrights of the past were removed from the internal halls and placed in the yard as a form of public reverence governed by hierarchy of age status. Moreover, a particular day was fixed for the *guru tika*. Since 2005, on the last day of Dashain, senior artists — actors, playwrights, teachers, dancers — gather for a public ceremony in Gurukul. Younger artists pay them respect and in return are ritually blessed with a *tika*.

As I said, the *guru-shishya parampara* is built upon the paradox of an intimate yet hierarchical relationship. (Antze 1991, Prickett 2007) Although the term *guru-shishya parampara* was never mentioned in Gurukul, hierarchy was expressed in several ways both through forms of address and services to the teachers. Seniority also appears as another important signifier in the relationships among actors. Sunil Pokharel, the group's director, was therefore the school guru, although he was never referred to (called) in this way. The use of the appellative 'Sir' marked Sunil's authority, thus suggesting a symbolic shift from guru to teacher. Within Gurukul, only Sunil and Basanta were called 'sir': Anil, another senior member of Aarohan who lived outside Gurukul but often engaged in its projects was addressed as *dai* (elder brother) although he was only a few years younger than Sunil. Sunil's wife Nisha was called *didi* (elder sister) but the familial nature of the term did not always signify a commensurate informality or intimacy. Students, in fact, respected Nisha's seniority by talking with her in a polite and calm manner, and Nisha wouldn't hesitate to scold them harshly in public. Among actors the spirit was more collaborative, open and friendly. Gurukul's artists addressed their older peers as *dai/didi* (older brother/older sister), but men did not call younger actresses *bahini*. They just used their names.

Hierarchy was manifest in everyday activities such as during meals. For example, for some months at the beginning of my fieldwork, senior actors regularly ate at the school canteen. Two

groups were formed. One included the management and the other the students of both in-takes. The division seemed 'natural' as the groups were never mixed. For me it was a puzzle as I never knew where to sit. I felt closer to the students with regard to position and familiarity. However, I felt that I also needed to talk and get to know senior actors as part of my role/non-role of anthropologist and meals are usually good occasions to socialize. So, I sometimes managed to 'break' these implicit rules. When I did, I felt that the management openly welcomed me, so it is possible that my perception may have been exaggerated by my intense observation (see Chapter one).

Service was evidently a central aspect in the guru-student relationship in Gurukul as well. For example, whenever necessary, actresses went to Sunil's house to help his wife Nisha with cooking or cleaning. Likewise, artists gave massages to Sunil whenever he needed one.¹⁵⁸ These and other actions can be framed as demonstrations of 'respect' towards the guru. In fact, actors deeply and sincerely admired Sunil as a guru. They valued both his artistic talent and his strength in carrying on his theatrical project.¹⁵⁹ Another sharp difference was evident in terms of material possessions. While the students lived in a very simple and basic manner, struggling to make ends meet, when I arrived in the end of 2004, Sunil owned a car and Nisha possessed a rich collection of saris. It was not a community of equals and this element will be taken up later while analysing conflicts.

These few examples aim to explain that in Gurukul leadership was personalized. Hierarchies existed and were respected. They were based on seniority and knowledge. Max Weber's writing on charisma and Hughes-Freeland's connection of charisma to the modern concept of celebrity (2007) can enlighten our understanding of leadership in Gurukul. Weber distinguished three kinds of authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational (Weber, 1964 [1947]:324). He was also aware that, in practice, a mixture of them can be found (Ibid. 216). Charismatic authority is based upon the perceived extraordinary characteristic of an individual whose mission and vision can inspire others (Ibid. 215). The charismatic leader, validated by public recognition, is instilled with special knowledge that nobody else has and of almost divine, supernatural power which can bring about revolutionary changes (Ibid.). 'Celebrity' is 'the attribution of glamour or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere' (Rojek cited in Hughes-Freeland 2007:178). I follow Hughes-Freeland in questioning evolutionist readings of Weber which mutually exclude charisma and legitimacy (Hughes-Freeland 2007:178).

¹⁵⁸ Many dancers mentioned washing clothes, preparing and carrying hot water for a bath, cleaning dishes, doing shopping, giving massage and oil baths to the teacher as acts performed as service (Antze 1991).

¹⁵⁹ Other hierarchies were evident in the group, but they have to be classified outside the guru-student relationship. For example, Devi *da*, the security man living in Gurukul washed Sunil's car or went down the road to buy betel or cigarettes for Sunil and Basanta. The kitchen boys were often called in what to me sounded as a rather aggressive manner to serve tea and food to senior actors. Similarly, when Sunil arrived with his car in the morning, it was his driver who carried his bag from the car to his office.

As an organization, Gurukul centred upon a mixed form of leadership, traditional and charismatic. The guru is indeed a traditional authority¹⁶⁰ (Antze 1991; Prickett 2007), legitimized by his link to an artistic tradition. Although Sunil did not inherit his role as many traditional artists had done but constructed it through study and practice, he is nonetheless publicly recognized as an authority in his field and belonging to a specific tradition, along the line of those artists that were venerated during *guru tika* day. Charismatic authority does not appear in a vacuum but grows out of pre-existing forms of traditional or legal authority which creates the boundaries, norms and social structure. The traditional role of the *guru*, opened the way for Sunil's charismatic leadership. In fact Sunil exercised leadership through the respect for his knowledge, in the form of 'mastery' sanctioned by the NSD diploma and 25 years of experience, and 'seniority' which included also a component of awe. Frequently actors shared with me their desire of talking openly to Sunil but simultaneously admitted their incapacity. They also shared their deep happiness whenever the director started personal conversations with them. Indeed, Aarohan actors' narratives exemplify their belief in Sunil's vision which inspired them to leave their jobs and take personal risks to 'follow him'.

Artistic authority and seniority were highly recognized and respected in Gurukul. Whenever a senior artist approached the hay shed under which actors and students used to sit and chat, the juniors were always ready to stand up and offer their seat. Such ceremonial chair rounds were highly significant of the person's social status. Sunil explains that a guru in fact deserves respect:

If like Dinesh Adhikari comes here, he is a poet, I have to leave and offer my chair saying 'please sit here' and it's very impolite that he is standing and I am sitting... because I am a teacher too, there is a privilege for me to decide about few things and say 'no'. And because of the respect for the teacher, even if you don't agree much you do. (Interviewed in English, November 2006)

Authority was, therefore, internalized and situational. While being Gurukul's *guru*, Sunil paid respect to his own masters in a 'traditional way', thus placing himself in a lower hierarchical rank. In traditional teaching, in fact, asking questions was perceived as a challenge to the *guru's* authority and knowledge (Prickett 2007). Even disagreement, especially if expressed in public, seemed to be a matter of serious concern in the relationship with superiors. These everyday instances provide revealing insights into the style of hierarchical relationships, not dissimilar to that described in Chapter two between the king and his countrymen.

¹⁶⁰ See Mines and Gourishankar 1990 for other forms of traditional authority, 'big men' in this case, in South Asia.

2.3. From guru to teacher?

At this point, I want to discuss some organizational conflicts that manifested themselves during the period of my fieldwork since they represent a revealing 'social drama' (Turner 1982) and help to understand the group's process of organizational formation. In addition, since *kachahari theatre* centres on conflict-resolution, observing the internal conflict management may provide valuable insight into cultural handlings of conflict and power that can be helpful to analyse *kachahari natak* itself.

Despite the conflicts that inevitably arise in community life, sharing the same space strengthened the friendship that linked the actors and that was evident on occasions like birthday parties or weddings celebrated inside the compound and theatre hall. The group also share each others' problems. For example, the management devised strategies to keep the group together and help actors face their family's pressures to marry. In a meeting in December 2004 Sunil told the artists that they could get married and bring their partners to Gurukul, allowing them to attend the 2-year course and start working with Aarohan. Sarita, one of the actresses from the first in-take, considered it a very important opportunity because all actors' families were pressing them to marry. Yet, according to her, such a proposal would benefit the male more than the female artists since women traditionally would have had to move to their husbands' house after marriage, and probably quit the theatre. Soon afterwards Suresh married. His wife joined the Gurukul training. Coming from a village in Salyan, Western Nepal, she felt uncomfortable with the theatre. She quit the course and began training in a field that she preferred. Subsequently, other actors married but none of their wives joined the group. The effort to encourage actors' partners' membership in the school, by recruiting through family connections rather than interest, did not work.

At the end of 2004, many artists were not happy with the organizational rules and started to raise their requests during internal meetings. Their main concerns were financial shortage and control. They did not have enough money to live and they would have liked to go out more freely. What actors asked for in December 2004 was one day off a week, so they could work outside. According to some artists, they could have earned NRs 1,500 extra a month – to add to their NRs 5,000 wage – if they could work outside four days a month. In fact, the management did not allow students to work outside in other theatre productions or projects but required them to concentrate fully on Gurukul work. This prescription of exclusivity or institutional loyalty recalls the classical guru expectations of complete faithfulness to the guru's tradition, and obedience to his instructions in art

and life embedded in *sadhana* (Antze 1991; Prickett 2007).¹⁶¹ For example, in 2005 an actor was denied permission to rehearse with a group from his own city which was at that time going to perform in Kathmandu. Similarly, the management refused him permission to attend tuition classes to prepare for his exams. Artists were later allowed to work outside but had to give 10% of their wages to the group. Since external earning was already rather modest, many artists started working without officially informing the management. This attitude created a closure to the outside world that became unbearable for the whole group, including the management itself. In February 2005, in fact, both the director and the artists lamented their inability to lead a private life separate from their professional life and they decided to fix Sunday as the day off. Unlike in the traditional *guru-kula*, life and theatre started to separate. What seemed in theory an ideal situation, that is, the collapse of life into theatre, led in practice to a trap. The 'special' could not be sustained in the long run and a division between personal life and work in theatre had to be established.

Yet, from daily conversations with Gurukul's artists, it was clear that conflicts were frequently hidden rather than openly discussed, especially if they involved Sunil's leadership. An invisible barrier of respect and seniority prevented questioning it. In March 2005 an institutional conflict burst out. It involved the school management and the foreign development adviser who claimed to represent the students when objecting to the director's charismatic leadership as 'non-democratic'. The director rejected the observation and none of the students publicly supported the opinions they had shared with the adviser in the backstage. According to the partnership with MS Nepal, in fact, the group could decide to modify their agreements any time. Claiming they had become self-sufficient in organizational work, the management decided that the adviser's presence was no longer needed. She was therefore dismissed a year before the end of her contract. Citing Hutt (2006), there were 'things that could not be said'¹⁶² or conveyed in an open manner.

Instead of allowing artistic freedom, the management's strict control over actors' lives in line with traditional form of artistic education turned the compound into a 'closed space'. In July 2005 the atmosphere in Gurukul was tense indeed. I could perceive it strongly whenever entering the compound, without really knowing what was going on. I projected the tension towards myself. I questioned my presence in the group. One morning I met Sunil and asked if I could continue my research there or if I should leave. I had the feeling artists were not collaborating with me and all my attempts at understanding were thwarted. He dismissed my worries explaining that they were very busy with work. This was the only reason why they were not talking to me. But I could continue my

¹⁶¹ Even in India personal loyalty to a specific guru has turned into institutional loyalty. For example, students at Kathak Kendra in New Delhi and at Kalakshetra in Chennai are not allowed to train outside the academies while they are enrolled in courses (Prickett 2007)

¹⁶² Cr. political issues that could not be talked about in Chapter three.

work as before. The management's effort to keep the group united by imposing constraints in actors' mobility in space and a sort of *guru-shishya* relationship partially failed. In August 2005 the conflict escalated. The cause was a sensitive matter and it was rather difficult for me to discuss them with the management. Some actors complained of a centralization of power, lack of recognition for their work, bias in casting in favour of relatives and a lack of professional 'chances'. Some artists revealed that their expectations were not met. They said that when they joined Gurukul, the place was supposed to become a good institute. According to some artists, if it were a 'real' institute, they could also work outside, or in the film industry without problems. The reality revealed itself to be different. According to them, Gurukul had become 'Sunil's home', 'we are like their 'servants' and 'when Nisha does not like somebody, she kicks them out'. Another complaint was about the lack of credit for their work. For example, an actor conducted a workshop with a community group and created with them what later became a successful production. I also followed the development of the play and Sunil only checked the play from time to time and gave some suggestions. At the end, on the brochure, Sunil appeared as the only director. The actor who did the hard work everyday did not even appear as assistant director.

Some artists felt neglected because the management did not share with them information and decisions about the organization and held meetings for restricted groups in the director's house. Some actors felt humiliated, angry and frustrated because they could not express their artistic ideas. Some said they had tried to raise questions in meetings, 'like in *kachahari natak* ', but the management took the issues personally and later punished the people by preventing them from going abroad. In fact, the artists who complained the least were said to get the best roles; those who raised their voices were artistically marginalized. 'This is our tradition, people always think you have to follow me, listen to my words and don't say anything against me', was one comment. Others even questioned the 'service' they were expected to do to their guru, complaining they were not house workers who had to clean their clothes. 'He's not giving space,[or] responsibility to people'. 'There is no future, no security, no money, why should I stay here?' questioned another artist.

In August 2005 all the artists threatened the director that they would leave Gurukul. The director promised to improve the situation but, according to some artists, in practice not much changed afterwards and the group started to lose unity. The promise of change — a sort of redressive measure - led to schism and reluctant continuity. More freedom of movement or dress was achieved, but the hierarchical nature of the guru-student relationship remained the same. Some artists left and formed a splinter group in 2007. However, before leaving Gurukul they did not manage to express openly the deep reasons of their dissent to the director. They claimed that he is their senior, their guru, and basically that nothing would have changed anyway had they spoken out. The rest of the

artists remained, complaining about the lack of opportunities in theatre outside Aarohan. Some found a room outside the compound and went to Gurukul just for 'work'. Most of the artists ate in their own rooms. The conviviality experienced in the first period dissipated. Few people ate at the canteen in the summer of 2007 when I returned. The atmosphere of community that I had found in late 2004 was over. The distance between life and theatre increased even further.

The risk of reviving tradition is that of reproducing the unequal power relations embedded in them (Hashmi 1989). We can therefore claim that what was being challenged in Gurukul was the *guru-shishya* type of relationship rather than the leader as a person. Many examples from India support this conclusion. For example, a student's unconditional deference to a *guru* is perceived as problematic in contemporary society (Prickett 2007). A dance student reported that his 'intolerance to serfdom' led to his professional isolation (Rajan cited in Prickett 2007). As a result, private gurus and some institutions have started introducing pedagogical and organizational changes (Prickett 2007). A distinction is being drawn between the role of a 'guru' providing the student with a holistic experience (spiritual, emotional and physical) and that of a 'teacher' who just teaches dance steps (Rajarani cited in Prickett 2007:35). The preference for the second model suggests the shift in the arts from the domain of 'religion' to that of the 'secular': the *guru* was no more followed as a 'god'. Yet, I think another aspect needs to be considered to complement the challenge to the *parampara*. Gurukul's exponential growth, both in material infrastructure (a second hall was built in 2006/7, a generator supported the frequent power cuts) and popularity was not felt to have trickled down equally among the members of the group. In fact, at the foundation of the school, both the senior artists and the students had agreed to 'jump', as they said, that is, to take the risk of getting involved in Gurukul. Diversity in economic status among actors can be another subterranean source of tension. While seeing the leader improving his living standards, actors continued to struggle on NRs. 5,000 a month - although in 2006 many artists had started teaching drama in schools outside the compound. Meanwhile, their responsibilities had increased because of marriage and the birth of children. 'Some said that in the [bank] account of Aarohan Theatre there was no money, but they have a lot' was a rumour circulating within the group.

Some questions emerge. Is it possible that this breakdown was also inevitable when the very values the group was seeking to promote in its street theatre, such as democracy and free speech, were not given full expression within its own organisational culture? Conflicts also witnessed the fact that acting in theatre was perceived more and more not also as a respectable profession but also as a financially rewarding one. I will tackle these questions later on.

Gurukul's participation in MS Nepal's project of institutionalization did not change relations in practice, although it certainly put in place new representations of leadership (Mosse 2005). As a

result of the growing institutionalization of the group, the roles and positions inside the group became more defined to increase the representation of efficiency. Sunil continued to lead as artistic director. Basanta resigned from his job at the Home Ministry (early 2004) to occupy a full-time position as chief administrator (*Thul Daju*)¹⁶³, supported by Anoj who lived and worked in Gurukul as an unpaid volunteer. Yubaraj was assigned a place in the office and was responsible for networking with local communities, follow up activities and media (described as *saathi*). As a small organization, Aarohan's actors had to work as 'generalists' rather than as 'specialists'.¹⁶⁴ They had both to act, on stage and in the streets, and run the other departments, such as lighting, library, stage managing, etc. Individual actors were responsible for the supervision of different departments. The position of guru was more clearly defined, but even that was in a continual process of negotiation.

Two conclusions can be drawn at this point about the organizational development of Gurukul. One concerns the form of leadership, the other the way through which the conflict is expressed. In terms of organizational structure, a clearer division of labour liberated the theatre group director from the necessity of participating in all decision-making, and granted students more responsibility and independence in their work. Whether increased responsibility was real or just a representation, depended upon the points of view. In an interview, Sunil discussed the problems involved in his role. He explained that when the school was set up, it was not an organization. It started with his personal money, 18 lakh rupees. Then he asked the actors to join.

Then it's becoming slowly a sort of system. Accounting, administration. It's somewhere between a group and an organization. Sometimes we practice as a group, sometimes we practice as an organization. Accounting, tax is legal. So this mixed form, 'sometimes a group, sometimes an organization' (Interviewed in English, July 2007)

Sunil explained that because they are involved in cultural activity they are not registered as a profit-making organisation. The organisation can make a profit, but the profits cannot be shared. Since the actors (excluding the management) are not members of Aarohan Theatre, they have no shares in the future. Depending on how the group grows, he would think of establishing a company or cooperative. Sunil, in fact worried about the actors' pensions because they were still not in a position to save money. He would ideally like to establish a core group of artists and then enrol new students to enrich the group with different talents. In order to develop the organization Sunil acknowledged the need to have 'second level leadership'. However, according to him not many actors were interested in taking

¹⁶³ Official title of the position in the project.

¹⁶⁴ The terms come from an 'Arts management' workshop hosted in Gurukul in February 2005. It was sponsored by the Oslo National Theatre and run by its art manager.

up leadership tasks because they were considered boring, attracting more 'blame' than praise. He also saw a lot of dependency:

Now I can see the negative elements of staying together too - people don't take up personal responsibilities for the group and wait - so what is the perfect way I don't know yet. The problem will get more, everybody will get married, this year and next, it's their age, they have to keep some time for their families. How to survive and manage I don't know, that's why my thought was to have the land, we'll give every family a three room apartment, I'm still thinking about this. If we buy some land or if we have some land by the government, we're trying to approach the government to give us some land, then we'll have apartments for everyone (Ibid.).

On the one hand, Sunil's expectations regarding actors' assumption of responsibility were not met. On the other, the artists' expectations concerning a material improvement of their lives and professional independence were frustrated. In late 2004, one of Gurukul's artists described their future only in terms of the group: there was no other imaginable alternative to living and working there. But by 2007, this same person was secretly looking for a scholarship to go abroad, as neither Gurukul nor Nepal seemed to offer security.

The difference between the managers and the group members and the latter's lack of 'development' was described in terms of facilities and availability of material goods. The following narrative circulated in the group in 2008. Though at the founding of Gurukul all artists ate together at the canteen, later on Sunil and his wife brought rice from home because what was cooked in the canteen was not considered good. Whereas earlier they all drank filtered water from the canteen, later on Sunil and his wife only drank bottled mineral water. Earlier Sunil's wife used to buy clothes worth NRs. 500, but subsequently she began wearing saris worth NRs. 5,000. Initially they had all travelled by public transport, later Sunil bought a car. Recently, Sunil bought another bigger car and spend NRs. 500 a day on petrol for commuting back and forth from Gurukul to his house. They could spend NRs 55 travelling by bus. Both Basanta and Sunil were living in newly constructed houses, while the actors were still renting rooms. Whatever bikes the artists could buy, they managed because of the support of their families. In 2008, the artists' monthly wage was raised from NRs. 5,000 to 7,000.

According to the artists, the donors knew about the unequal distribution of wealth in Gurukul but did not intervene. When the theatre group is obviously developing, when projects are interpreted and heralded as successful, when prosperity increases, and when personal relationships are being forged amongst senior group members and foreign donors, not many questions are asked. Cultural transformations were at work in the theatre group, though. Discussing the social movement of the regional indigenous people of the Cordillera, Hillhorst (2003:31) advocates talking about 'identification' rather than 'collective identity', as identity incorporated notions of contestation and

fragmentation. I believe the concept of 'identification' can be extended to an organization as well. While agreeing with the general three-point 'mission' of Aarohan - 'bringing theatre to the Nepali people', 'exploring a Nepali theatre language', and 'promoting social justice, pluralism and democracy' - within the group there were different, and sometimes contrasting, opinions as to what each of these mottos meant in practice.

What emerged during the period of my fieldwork were disjunctures at different levels. There were multiple and contradictory faces: between management and actors; between management and donors; between actors and donors; between the group and the media; between the group and the intellectuals; between the 'front' and 'back stage' of the organization.

Paradoxically, the image of theatre as the locus of democracy, freedom and liberation projected to the outside world seemed conversely contradicted in daily inner practices. It was only when I explicitly asked questions as a result of having observed tensions and contrasts that actors talked openly about their experiences. The reasons for discontent centred on a 'lack of equal opportunity', and a strategic use of 'seniority' and nepotism. Some actors felt their capacity was not recognized, that they had no opportunity to grow in their profession, 'sometimes I don't feel freedom, even inside the theatre' commented one artist (name withheld), 'for example, I want to do something new, maybe after finishing the performance. They shout at me, I'm blocked, so I stop there, I don't go forward'.

Moreover, some artists felt that staying quiet and obeying whatever the leader said would lead to good opportunities. Those people who reacted or protested were sidelined or professionally punished. Such behaviour was felt to be a 'tradition of Nepal': 'if I am minister, I am the chief minister, I'll make my family members as associates....who is near, who receives my words, who always say *hajur hajur hajur ...*' (Ibid.). The political environment outside Gurukul offered powerful mirrors, which often came to my mind when observing the artists' feelings. The group was performing theatre of the oppressed and theatre for democracy in the streets. Yet, life inside the organization was depicted by some artists as a 'monarchy' or a 'dictatorship'.

Ironically, the specialists in 'giving voice to the voiceless' remained silent. One artist said they did not share their problems because they did not want to depress the other actors or me. Another commented that they did not want to talk because talking would give them a headache and that things would change only with the next generation. When further provoked, they said they were doing theatre of the oppressed but were not reacting to their own oppressions, that they were not going to school like the girl of their *kachahari* play. One actor jokingly replied that they would need the Maoists there!

Theatre actors' narratives and metaphors reveal a feeling of powerlessness towards their daily 'oppressions'. They could not see a possibility within their reach and projected a possible solution into the future by talking of the next generation. There is a golden rule in the play scripting of any forum play. You have to have a possibility. You cannot script a play where the oppressed is dead and ask the audience how to find a way out. But precisely this kind of a scenario seemed to be unfolding at Gurukul.

One person, knowing the lifestyle inside the school, described the actors as 'puppets'. In reality, they seemed much aware of their contextual situation. They just could not see a way out or speak about it; they felt powerless. Some artists revealed that they remained because they loved theatre and that there was no other place to go to in Nepal, but others left the group. Despite many people seemed to know about the inequalities inside the group - fellow actors, directors, intellectuals, media and journalists, theatre people who know Gurukul well, representatives of donors, both Nepali and foreigners - all were nonetheless interested in maintaining the dominant and official narrative. 'Celebrity' replaced or complemented the decreasing charisma evident inside the group. They sustained the front stage in order to boost 'Nepali theatre' or meet their objectives. But what, or who is 'Nepali theatre'?

In conclusion, despite the clear and powerful 'front stage' image of Aarohan as an organization promoting and providing social sustainability to actors and to their networks, the 'back stage' revealed deep fractures within their organization and contradictions in their artistic work. Let us move now back to the Maoist cultural groups, to see how they lived their role of artists engaged in political work to bring about social change.

3. Revolutionary artists and art for 'social change'

During the period of my fieldwork, around 1,500 artists were engaged in the Maoist ranks as whole timers in composing songs, dramas and dances for the different cultural groups spread throughout the whole country. Cultural troupes are active in each of the 75 districts of Nepal. There are 13 groups representing each of the Maoist federal states and 11 are linked to the ethnic fronts (Sharma 2004:41-42). Samana Parivar is the cultural group associated with the party's central committee. Sometimes the groups perform jointly for occasional events. For example, in the Kathmandu area where I carried out my fieldwork, the district troupe in charge was Sen Chyang. However, Newa Parivar, the group associated to the Newar state, also performed in the same area. Samana Parivar

frequently toured the countryside but was present for important public meetings in the capital. From an organizational and ideological point of view, the cultural troupes are strictly connected to the party's agenda. In fact, they are dependant on the party for political organization and thought. Yet, they remain independent in the creative side and in the practical organization of their work, such as logistical arrangement, rehearsal, trainings and fundraising. Each team performs an average of two to four programmes a day during campaigning periods. The number decreases to 10-15 shows a month for the rest of the year. In this section, I want to describe the role of the artists within the Maoist party, the contradictions they faced when entering mainstream society after the war, and how their particular position affects their artistic performances.

4. Being political artists and activists

We reached the camp in Godavari around 8.30 PM, on the usual crammed bus, full of artists and followers — usually PLA [People's Liberation Army] who had not found a proper place yet as well as those in charge of the security — both inside and on the top of the bus. Everybody is tired after the cultural programme. If a programme starts at 3 PM, artists have to reach at 12 AM, to set up the instruments and entertain the audience before the beginning of the political speeches. When the programme takes place in an equipped space like Khula Manch, the artists change their costumes and wait either in the rooms attached on the backstage or in tents set up for the purpose on the back side. After returning to Godavari, the artists in charge of the kitchen realize there is no food to cook. They have to go out and look for some. In the meantime, some artists go to sleep in the dormitories. Others watch TV. Time passes but there is no call for dinner. In one of the bedrooms that hosts the TV, a group of artists watch a Nepali movie, a pirated DVD with a horrible sound and faded colours, and complain about its bad quality. Others talk, or sleep. The commander is also sitting with us, watching the film. At around 11 PM, he is called for a meeting. He has not eaten yet. He gets up unwillingly, and comments, very annoyed '*Kasto jivan ho yo, sangarsako jivan!*' (What kind of life is this life of struggle!) He says he will be back but he does not return. At around 11.30 I go to sleep. Few people remain to watch TV. Rice is not yet ready. (From my field-notes, September 2007)

A slogan painted on the wall of the building that functioned as camp in Godavari said '*sangarsa euta jivan ho*': struggle is a way of life. However, it is indeed not an easy way. Cultural groups usually gather around 50 artists, even though they do not perform all at the same time. Moreover, since I met the groups in a transitional period, People's Liberation Army members first and Young Communist League cadres later on, often lived in the same place. Most of the artists belonging to the group I worked with in 2006 were young, from 16 years to the late 20s. Leaders, in contrast, were in their 30s or even older. During the first period of my stay with the group, the commander guessed what he

thought were my questions regarding the age of the artists, especially girls. He explained that they came from villages where they would not have been able even to go to school, thus suggesting that travelling with them was a better option. Some of artists that I met explained that they joined the group out of a commitment towards revolution; some had parents or relatives in the party and followed their family choices. Others joined out of a passion for dancing and singing. One artist told me that at first she did not understand much about the party but afterwards she learned about it. The concept framing the group is that of a 'family', as in the theatre. Members in fact, alternate the appellative 'comrade' with the more common '*dai/bhai*' (brother) or '*didi/bahini*' (sister) when calling each other. Members of each cultural group share the residential space in the camp and move together by bus according to the location of the cultural programmes. Artists – both male and female - are also involved in shifts in the kitchen while everyone washed their own plates. In the camp, there are separate male and female dormitories. On some occasions, I noticed that the Commissar or the Commander had a single room with a bed rather than a mat on the floor suggesting hierarchy at work. Moreover, unequal resources could be noticed among the different cultural groups themselves: some had good quality blankets, others lacked enough for all. Some groups had a TV set, others did not. When I asked for explanations, an artist belonging to the 'poorest' group explained that the difference depended upon the commanders' ability in fundraising. Some groups, I was told, were financially supported by affluent people. However, the same artists belonging to the 'poorer' group, remarked that the group was well managed by the leadership despite the lack of material goods. In fact, according to them, there was equality among members and artists from different ethnic backgrounds were not discriminated against as in other cultural groups.

The role of Maoist artists within the party changed over time. For example, during the People's War, artists were underground and had to travel in disguise. One Commissar recalls that the beginning of their war, they walked from village to village at night, and performed only after closing the doors of the houses in which they were hosted, 'playing *mada* with a small voice, sometimes playing bells and glasses' (Interview, November 2006).

Maoist artists often stress their closeness to the villagers that characterized the war period. At that time, mobilization work was carried out in the villages far from the urban areas which were under the control of the Nepali army. However, during the first stages of the war, a Commissar explained that villagers were usually scared of Maoists so cultural programmes were occasions through which artists not only conveyed political thought but also built trust. Songs were used to establish a connection with the audience and to communicate with them. In order to persuade the villagers that they were their friends, artists helped them in their daily works and were hosted by them in return, as a Commissar recalls:

We listened to them [villagers] after eating rice. We helped them with their chores, building their houses. We gave medicine to sick people. If we had food we shared it with them as well. We helped farmers plough the fields, and helped with work inside and outside the house. So people came to think that Maoists are good people, and the Maoist party is good [...] At that time we did programs. I sang songs. And after listening to my songs, people commented that the songs were 'so nice' (*kati mitho git*), and then I talked, and then again I sang. I had a guitar. Now I can't play the guitar because my fingers have been damaged in a bomb blast... People listened and relaxed, and then I talked political and ideological things, about the war, why we had to go into war. We tried to convince them, and they were convinced (Interview, September 2007)

This rosy picture is contradicted by other tales of the dangerous predicament in which villagers found themselves: on the one side, the Maoist rebels seeking shelter, on the other the police accusing the villagers of siding with the revolutionaries and offering food or shelter. The problems in staging a *kachahari* play on this issue which I discussed in Chapter 4, stands in contrast to the commissar's narrative. Anyway, he gives us hints about the multiple roles of artists and party activists. In fact, cultural workers sang songs, entertained the audience, explained the songs' messages, listen to the audiences' problems and live with them. During the war, artists were also warriors, political leaders, cultural members and organizers of programmes. The artists' way of life and work allowed them to establish close bonds with the inhabitants of rural areas. Moreover, unlike some city-based artists who traveled in the hills during the Jhapa movement (see Chapter two), the background of the artists belonging to the group I met was similar to the villagers, as another commander pointed out (see table 5.1):

This is the main thought: we were born in huts, we are people from remote areas, who suffered from injustice, violence, corruption, oppression, very discriminated communities. Our community is Tamang, we are oppressed by caste, we are also an oppressed class. Only high-class people are active in society and seeing all this we got knowledge that we should fight against this. Then we got involved. Our aim was to be active politically, but what the party said was that if your ability is in music, in writing, in going to war you should follow it. Some people have principally the capacity of explaining, ours is of singing, writing, playing instruments. If you have this ability, you will work in this area. The party gave us this responsibility and in these 10 years we worked in this area (Interview, October 2006).

This is how a Commissar explains the artists' closeness to the common people, how they represent their voices and need the audience support. Moreover, artists claim no 'special' status for themselves because of their art:

We are not trained actors from any academy or from any music school. We played *saranghi* in the villages, earlier the *saranghi* only gave the tunes of tragedy, there we filled the tune of revolution. In the *madal*, *murchunga* there was only one type of tune. There we put diversity. By singing and dancing in this way in the villages and basti not only mothers' and

sisters' pains and tragedies, we also put in music revolutionary knowledge. That is why we are not trained or qualified. We are not professional artists. We may also have weaknesses. For this you have to give us your verbal and written comment as your own sons and brothers (Public speech, October 2006).

I met the cultural groups with whom I worked in 2006, that is when they had already entered the city and their working strategy had by then already changed. Artists in fact lived in camps and travelled together to the different venues where they had to perform. In 2008, one commissar revealed that after they settled in Kathmandu, they had lost contact with the grassroots and therefore, for the Constituent Assembly election campaign, they felt the need to 'go back to the people'.

Being a full-time artist in a Maoist cultural group thus emerges as an all embracing commitment. Maoist 'culture', as well as the shared objective of struggle, certainly function as a powerful glue to hold different people together. Maoist culture dictated norms regarding daily practices, as for marriage (against polygamy, dowry, son preference), gender roles (Onesto 2006), festivals, fashion, body display, and relationship attitudes. The artists' degree of adherence to such rules varied throughout the different stages of my fieldwork. For example, in 2006, female artists were not supposed to wear earrings or nose pins – although some commanders did, or clothes other than simple *kurta-surwal* or pants and shirt. They told me the commanders would scold them if they refused to obey; but they were free to wear what they liked when they went home for holidays. Much more freedom appeared between 2007 and 2008 when girls not only started to wear jeans, but also lip-gloss and sunglasses when going out of the camp. When performing in the villages during the People's War, artists narrated that they were not concerned with make-up or look in general. After settling in Kathmandu and performing in popular halls like the Nepal Academy or City Hall, they felt the need to improve their artistic skills and become more 'professional'. This led them to attend music, singing and dance classes. One example is interesting as it expresses the degree of internal contradiction. In 2007, artists performed at the Nepal Academy for a fundraising programme. The usual discussions that took place the day after, mainly to share problems and find ways of enhancing the performance, centred on the make-up of the lead actress. A strong group, mainly composed of males, vehemently criticized her and the other actors for using marked make-up. She explained that they are not in the jungle anymore and they have to fit in with Kathmandu audience expectations so they need to follow the common practice of applying heavy make-up for stage lights. The group opposing her claimed they should not follow such 'bourgeois culture' but, rather change it. Moreover, if in 2006 artists mostly listened to revolutionary songs in their free time, in 2008 commercial pop cassettes powerfully entered not only the camp but also the artists' discussions and style models for their productions. For example, in 2008 one of the most talented dancers of the group I worked with,

as well as one of my key informants, left the party and the cultural group as a result of profound disagreement. The general mood among the artists was low as they felt the party was not taking care of their needs or providing them opportunities to improve their lives. Despite having heralded Maoist culture for six years as a member of a cultural group, she started to dance in a casino in Kathmandu for a living.

While having changed throughout the different stages of the revolution, the identity of Maoist artists is complex. Dedication to social transformation requires full time commitment that is hard to be sustained over time among all members, especially after leaving the underground and coming into contact with the urban enticements and the bourgeois 'culture' of Kathmandu. In 2008, the commissar of the group I worked with revealed that he was tired of living with the same people as he had spend the previous four years with his group members. His concerns are similar to those expressed by Sunil Pokharel regarding his experiences with the Gurukul theatrical community.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the development of Aarohan theatre group into an organization in the course of its attempt to professionalize theatre. This process involved opening of a theatre community and the establishment of two theatre halls, the creation of the first private theatre school in the country, the production and staging of regular proscenium theatre plays, the development of a theatre audience that would follow the productions (the group often invited college students for matinee performances and some artists were engaged in marketing) and would be interested in buying cultural work, the organization of national and international theatre festivals, the delineation of more specific organizational roles and structures, and the continuation of development theatre through *kachahari natak* performed by Aarohan group itself, as well as by their partner groups.

In short, the heroic mission of resurging Nepali theatre and 'sanitizing' the acting profession by making it not only respectable but also a potentially remunerative job was accomplished and the signs of its success started to be seen within the period of my fieldwork.

Many radical theatre groups at a certain stage of their evolution felt a need for stability, expressed through the building of stable theatre halls or in the engagement in productions close to the establishment or the neoliberal market (Van Erven 1988; 1992; Afzal-Khan 1997;2005; Barucha 1998). In an interview (Van Erven 1992:155) Safdar Hashmi talks about the different jobs he and his

actors had to do for a living while doing political theatre, and about the family pressure he was starting to feel. When they started, most of the group were unmarried but in the late 1980s [1988] they had to support their families. For this reason he felt the need to transform his group into a professional company and establish a workers' cultural centre where a repertory company could perform and train other groups. He was planning to work for TV and cinema for a couple of years in order to get the necessary money. His experiences reflect many of the problems felt by Aarohan in the attempt to professionalize the group.

One way in which Aarohan tried to achieve stability was through the opening of Gurukul and the institutionalization of the theatre group. However, the institutionalization of the group also increased the distance between leadership and the artists, which led either to public acceptance of the situation or to departure from the community. Many of the artists with whom I talked in 2007 confidentially revealed their intention of looking for jobs or scholarships abroad. In 2004 most of them could not consider leaving Gurukul as the place felt like 'home'. The private space in Gurukul, the space of the actors, also changed: at first it was a 'dominated space'; it later became more open. But despite the rules governing space in Gurukul became looser, some artists decided to move out or take rooms outside whilst maintaining their membership, suggesting that the place transformed from a 'home' into a 'work place'. The audience space inside Gurukul changed as well: from being free, or just NRs. 25 for undifferentiated seating, it later became regulated and hierarchic. The premieres of stage plays were reserved for guests on an invitation basis and the ticket prices vary from Rs 25 for students in defined areas of the hall, to Rs 50, 100 or 500 according to the position and the event.

While fully embedded in the economics of everyday life, and slowly turning acting in theatre into a respectable and sought after profession, in Gurukul theatre retained the 'special' attached to it. Aarohan artists decided to remain full time artists and not getting involved into any kind of social work. Although Aarohan reached thousands of students with their *kachahari* performances on child labour in schools, because of the context of performance and the methodology used, the *kachahari* became more aesthetically sophisticated shows than forms of social intervention. Barucha (1998) illustrated the paradoxes of the professionalization of Janam activism: the development of Aarohan showed a shift from theatre activism into theatre profession.

By contrast, while the Maoist cultural organisation was not tied to the parameters established by funding or by the desire of exploring new forms of theatre, they faced the dilemmas of changing from being political activists into political artists once they stabilized themselves in Kathmandu and focused on enhancing their artistic skills. Over time, the constraints and the necessity of bonding presented by the underground was removed, internal strains began to manifest themselves, at times threatening the unity of the group and the morale of the performers, widening

the gap between the group and the grassroots. The urban environment of Kathmandu produced different responses among the members of the troupe, some feeling the need to adapt to the new circumstances, even to the point of altering some aspects of their performance ethos, such as simplicity of presentation, and turning to forms of what they would have previously called 'bourgeois' art.

CONCLUSIONS

A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence in the course of which new ideas arise and new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity.

(Durkheim 1976:427 cited in St. John 2008:10)

One feeling guided my experience of doing fieldwork in Nepal in these strange times of swift political change: the transformation moved like a vortex, and there seemed to be no permanency, neither in relations, nor in commitments, neither words or in structures. One day you wake up and you are isolated from the whole world, and the political scenario turns upside down, what the king says, is not what he means. Once I asked one of my key informants if I could quote a controversial remark of his. He was surprised. 'Why not?' he replied, adding that if I would ask the same question the day after, he may change his mind and give a totally different answer, so there was no problem in quoting. There seemed to be no certainty beyond visibility and the present. And even what was visible sometimes seemed a fleeting representation of something else. One among myriads of possible representations. For this reason, I think, performance art, and theatrical performance in particular, could so well interpret the mood of the times. A piece of theatre is a multi-vocal, multi-spatial representation that leaves open as many possible interpretations as there are spectators. Yet, it does not entail a long-term commitment, and you cannot easily fix it. Ambiguity and liminality characterize

it. But for the same reasons, theatre can also create subtle emotional threads, support ideas, and thus sustain dreams and hopes (Mottin 2010).

In this concluding chapter, I am going to draw parallels between the different kinds of performances that I have documented, namely *loktantrik natak*, *kachahari natak* and Maoist cultural programmes (Mottin 2010). I will first wrap the main themes in relation to the theoretical questions raised in the introduction. I will then introduce comparative examples from Jana Sanskriti (see Chapter one, section 2.3) and Kamlari Natak Samuha, one of Aarohan partner groups which I visited twice in their village in Deukhuri Valley and whose rehearsal I followed for a month in Kathmandu. What I want to claim is that despite Forum Theatre became less participatory in Aarohan's adaptation, Aarohan artists were themselves rehearsing for their own lives when they practiced it in this way. What was at stake was the development of Nepali proscenium theatre as well as their identity. I will conclude by delving into the creativity produced by the aesthetic space, a space of hope and transformation, as well as the challenges it raises to anthropologists working in, by and through it.

1. Hot stages: arts-in-transition

There are two government institutions managing the performing arts in Nepal: the Nepal Academy and the Cultural Corporation. Both are connected to and control different spaces for performances, a big hall in the Academy, in Kalamadi, and a new National Theatre constructed near the offices of the Cultural Corporation in Jamal. One narrative was dominant among actors, though. No matter who was in power, according to many artists the government had never given any support to independent Nepali theatre groups and this was one of the reasons for its precarious present condition. In the 'past' theatre was popular. The National Theatre ran daily performances which attracted full houses. But such a glorious past was just a faded memory. Although most of the actors that I interviewed had had previous contact with the Royal Nepal Academy or the Cultural Corporation, as students, as actors during their productions, or as teachers, their impression of the institutions' work was negative, perceived as a 'lack' rather than a supportive 'presence'. While struggling to recreate the theatrical culture that flourished in the capital in the 1960s and 1970s, the two institutions, however, seemed far from the grassroots reality of both theatre and cultural groups, as well as from the aesthetic trends and organizational development expected by the artists.

Aarohan Theatre group was founded in the early 1980s and throughout the years based their identity on their ability to produce both aesthetically qualitative proscenium plays and cutting-edge

street performances to challenge the political system. Like other theatre groups in Nepal, Aarohan remained a loose network of amateur artists who gathered periodically around Sunil Pokharel for productions. Some joined during their free time and continued to be engaged in other professions, others alternated work in theatre with television, radio drama or street theatre. However, till when I started my fieldwork in the end of 2004, theatre productions were staged for two or three days sporadically, not even on monthly basis.

In this thesis I have outlined the historical moment in which Aarohan Theatre Group decided to move towards stability by opening the Gurukul school of theatre and by attempting to offer the Kathmandu audience regular proscenium plays; at the same time, the group engaged in the adaptation of Forum Theatre participatory technique in order to overcome previous message-oriented forms of street drama (Chapter two). I showed how *kahahari natak* developed along with a renaissance of the theatrical genre itself. As a result, during the period of my fieldwork, Aarohan Theatre was deeply involved on several stages: in the production and regular performance of proscenium plays, in the volunteer participation to street dramas for political change in association with the civil society movement, as well as in the strengthening of its organizational structure as well as their professional identity (Chapter three and Chapter five).

Drawing on the artists' reflections and my own participant observation, I argued that Aarohan Theatre group's commitment in several fronts, as well as their aesthetically oriented artistic aspirations centred on proscenium theatre, led to the standardization of *kachahari natak* itself. However, thanks to the financial and technical support from the NGOs who sponsored both development theatre and their organization building, the group managed to boost proscenium theatre productions and in few years created a supporting and enthusiastic audience. Students from the TU English Department directed by Prof. Abhi Subedi, a popular playwright and collaborator of Sunil Pokharel, regularly attended performances and seminars. University professors and college teachers, like Shiva Rijal, Prakash Subedi, Jeebesh Rayamajhi supported the group by producing literature about the Aarohan performances that was then published both in Aarohan periodical *Nepathya*, and on daily or weekly magazines like *The Kathmandu Post*, *Himal* or *Nepal*. Other artists like Anup Baral, Pushkar Gurung, Birendra Hamal often collaborated with Aarohan in staging proscenium plays or staged in Gurukul the work of their theatre groups. Artists' expectations were also high, and sometimes ended in conflict as I described in Chapter five. However, acting in theatre was emerging as a profession. The professional and artistic pressures of the artists' identities took over the activist and social worker's drive, although Aarohan artists were keen on playing out their responsibility as citizens during the popular movement of 2006 by performing political plays (see Chapter three). But

even the life experience of Maoist cultural workers showed that becoming a 'professional cultural activist' is indeed an activity fraught with challenges (see Chapter five).

I have also placed *kachahari natak* as well as *loktantrik natak* within well-established practices of using cultural performance to generate social critique and draw attention to social problems that characterizes Nepal (Chapter two). Continuities with the past have been described as well as contemporary innovations. Both *kachahari natak* and *loktantrik natak* not merely represent development or political forms of theatre. Deeply embedded in the social and cultural context, in the local aesthetic discourses and performance practices, they are forms of popular culture, as indeed are Maoist cultural performances (Mottin 2010; Chapter four and five).

A comparison between *kachahari natak*, *loktantrik natak* and Maoist cultural performance reveals how representational performances can become means to both construct and deconstruct power at personal and macro level: *kachahari natak* may become an arena in which to question the brokers who exploit construction labour - in the next section I will sum up how the possibility of social transformation through theatre is affected by the conditions of performance; *loktantrik natak* provided artists and audience with a platform in which to deconstruct the royal power and the illusions created by political parties. Theatre performances also constructed a different reality in which the little girl could speak out (*kachahari natak*) and where the strength of the people could overcome autocracy and keep challenging the political parties in power (*loktantrik natak*). In the Maoist case, performance is deliberately employed as part of a wider political strategy to popularize the party's objectives, to mobilize cadres, to construct the party's image and its project of revolution.

What also emerged is that playing around the margins between fiction and reality in the aesthetic space is indeed challenging. If the topic represented on stage is highly relevant to actors and audience, for instance, construction workers demanding their rights, citizens invoking democracy or the Maoists re-enacting their war experience, the stage is not a neutral or safe space at all like practitioners often claim. Conversely; it can create an extremely dangerous environment; conflict can burst and increase rather than be resolved. In contrast, if there is no close identification between characters, topic and audience, such as in the case of the *kachahari natak* on child labour, discussions can indeed take place freely but the transformative power of the aesthetic space is lost.

What kind of challenge to power could the resolutions tried out on stage represent if, in reality, the audience themselves do not face the oppressions represented in the drama, such as middle class students playing the role of a child worker that cannot go to school? In such a case, moreover, the embodied component of the oppression that is usually confronted by replacing the character on stage does not even exist: the creative shift between reality/play and on/off stage is not triggered. Very often the audience that attend *loktantrik natak* performances or Maoist cultural

programmes, find in the play elements that trigger reflections upon their personal lives as well as a structure through which to channel, in case, the enactment of the scripts performed on stage in real life. Identification plays an important role in allowing for reflection first, and then social transformation. However, artists' own professional experience itself shows that awareness cannot be enough to produce real life change (see Chapter five).

Boal (1979) thought that what made a performance really critical was its structure that is breaking away from the separation between actors and audience. My fieldwork experience has showed that participation is not only a matter a physical sharing of the aesthetic space and the structure of the play is not enough to guarantee real participation or possibility of social transformation through theatre.

The content of the play has a central role in triggering involvement and agency from the spectators. Emotional participation and agency can be also released by message-oriented dramas such as *loktantrik natak* or Maoist theatre if the audience can identify with the characters on stage. If emotional and physical involvement are combined, like in the *kachahari* about the construction workers has shown, theatrical participation can become a life changing experience as Bikram explained (Chapter four). However, after participating in the *kachahari natak* organized by Aarohan Theatre, Bikram continued to work with theatre during his union meetings. In collaboration with Vijay Bisfod (see Chapter two), he reworked the *kachahari* play and staged it with some other workers during a political programme organized by his union (see photo below) in order to raise awareness about their rights. *Kachahari* underwent another appropriation and returned to the domain of agit-prop.



Fig.41. Group photo of the workers' programme in Gurukul, Bikram is in the centre wearing a blue shirt.

Participation in a performance also involves sharing common problems, feelings, hopes, opportunities and desire for change. It also means belonging to an environment that can support the actualization of the different world envisioned onstage. The difficulties of reconciling simultaneous involvement in professional artistic stage theatre and activist social theatre have been examined (Chapter five). The opposition between 'revolutionary' and 'bourgeois' art is sharp and is used to mark distinctions between different artistic productions (Mottin 2010). While introducing me to another person the Commissar of Sen Chayng Sankritik Parivar explained that I was doing research on Nepali theatre (October 2006). After studying 'bourgeois theatre,' I wanted to know more about their 'revolutionary theatre'. This was the first time I had heard the theatre performed by Aarohan labelled as 'bourgeois'. In fact, the group had established itself in opposition both to the Panchayat system since its establishment in 1982 and to the royal regime in the last years (Chapter two and four), and portrayed itself as a group born from radical street performance. With the search for stability since 2002, Aarohan had also probably made a more defined shift from 'partial'¹⁶⁵ radicalism to bourgeois that characterizes many other 'radical' theatre companies (van Erven 1988; 1993; Barucha 2003; Afzal-Khan 2005).

For example, el Teatro Campesino provides an instance of a theatre group that started performing during farmers' strike as the cultural branch of Cesar Chavez's Mexican-American farm-workers union. During the 60s, the group identified with the political and cultural struggle of the oppressed Mexican-American minority. According to Elam (2001), by conflating the political, spiritual and performative Chicano cultural practices within the context of the protest movement the plays moved beyond mimesis, 'encompassing the "methexis" that enable performers and spectators to blur and meld their distinctive identities into the discourses at hand' (Ibid 36). In the 80s their practices underwent deep transformation, and the group staged expensive commercial productions in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York (van Erven 1988). Van Erven explains that Luis Valdez, director of el Teatro Campesino, 'wanted to prove that Chicano theatre can compete with the best in American professional theatre world' (Ibid. 52). He continues quoting Valdes: 'I'm determined to make it as a professional artist. I'm going to make movies that make money. I'm going to make plays that are critical and commercial successes, just to prove the forces that be that what goes on in Juan Balutista must be funded'(Ibid.). Van Erven argues that supported by an annual state grant of \$ 300,000, the group seems to have 'sold out to bourgeois cultural standards' (Ibid. 53). Yet, he continues, their success is a revolution itself as el Teatro Campesino is the first Mexican-American group to gain recognition in the professional arts circles. The company's administrative director explains:

¹⁶⁵ The group in fact from the very beginning of their activities performed plays that attracted learned and bourgeois audience (see Chapter one, section 3.5).

The teatro has grown older, its reputation, and the standard of aesthetics has grown – demands for quality on the part of the audience also. It gained responsibilities. It can't go back and do the same kinds of things it did in the beginning. When the teatro was young it travelled and didn't mind roughing it. But as you grow older you simply can't continue travelling. Also the teatro was born in the grape strike, and in the beginning, its sole purpose was to educate the farm workers, performing on flatbed Fords. But a couple of years following that, talking about the farmworkers issues no longer was the entire story. That's when the teatro went into student unions and started tackling civil rights issues. At that time it felt no longer appropriately placed in farmworkers circle and needed to find a new home. The original core of actors followed Luis and established a commune-type situation. They shared everything, and they were receiving something like sixty dollars a month in salary. Five dollars extra for people with kids. It was very difficult for them to survive. But they believed in what they were doing, and they continued. Then the teatro started getting invited for tours, not only in the US but also in Europe as well. Gradually, they started being asked at more and more legitimate playhouses, performing arts centres, etc. With this new response, new responsibilities came. You simply can't go back to what it was before. (Ibid.)

Aarohan's growth and development therefore can also be considered revolutionary for the amount of cultural production offered to the audience and for filling a vacuum in the Nepali theatre. Contradictions in its ideology remain, but these are common to other theatre groups as well. For example, Ashoka Theatre, Pakistan, founded by Maddy Gauhar in 1983, grew in opposition to commercial theatre of urban Punjab during the period of martial law. Its credo stated that the group aimed to 'produce a socially meaningful theatre', to deliver a 'populist, anti-hierarchical, anti-elitist and anticolonial message' as well as espousing an equalitarian and democratic philosophy' (1997:44; 2005). Yet, Afzal-Khan has pointed out how such committed theatrical activity and militancy in critical political movements contradicts with strong hierarchy present inside the group and their collaboration with mainstream media (Ibid.). Similar ambiguities and tensions between professionalism and activism, 'theatre as an end in itself' and 'theatre for social transformation' have been exposed in Aarohan Theatre practice. In the next section, I will compare the 'conditions of performance' of *kachahari natak* as practiced by Aarohan Theatre in Kathmandu with the same form practised by Kamlari Natak Samuha in Deukhuri (Nepal) and the Forum Theatre organization and practice of Jans Sanskriti, West Bengal (India). The objective is to outline how the theatre groups' organization, ideology and technical choices may affect the possibility for the audience to 'participate' in a theatre performance and then attempt to practice the rehearsed script in real life.

2. 'Kachahari is not only theatre, it is social work'

The professional form of activism/professionalism that Aarohan Theatre Group was heading towards after their commitment in proscenium theatre increased seemed rather problematic. Artists'

complaints seemed to ask for a sort of 'coherence' between inner and outer representations, the group slogans and their real life practices. The standardized form of *kachahari* was perceived by some artists as 'commercial' (see Chapter four) a 'cultural commodity' rather than an intervention for social change, as the artist I quoted in this section heading clearly made clear (see Chapter four, section 4.1.f). According to George (1995) Boal's work itself presents some ideological contradictions; he defines Theatre of the Oppressed techniques as 'essentially middle-class, first-world tools with dubious third-world connections and perpetuated via self-congratulatory accounts' (Ibid.40). He quotes Boal's statement in 1989 NYU: 'I don't mind working with middle-class people – I'm middle-class myself. Why use theatre of the oppressed only with the poorest, the most miserable people [?]. In Paris my groups work with a feminist group, antiracist groups, a trade union, anti-drug organizations, immigrant groups, etc. Most of my groups are middle-class. I don't mind working in 'imperialist countries' like most of Europe and US – there are plenty of oppressed people in these places' (Ibid. 45). George suggests that Boal's theory and techniques have been accepted uncritically, taken out of context and practised at face value without examining concrete results. First, the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques (i.e. living newspaper, invisible theatre, etc.) have not been invented by Boal but just assembled by him as they derive from the 1960s European and American experimental and street theatre as well as from socio-drama (1995:51; Felhender 1994); Boal himself studies in at the Actors Studio in NY. Second, 'liberating' forms of theatre can be paternalistic: 'members of an alien social class would dictate to the people how theatre should be performed and how through it to view reality. One of the tenets of this school of engage art is that workers and peasants need middle-class heroes to lead them to social enlightenment' (Ibid. 40). Third, George questions the participation modes devised by Boal and claims that TO is 'a manipulative system in which the actors, who always wield immense power, have control over "the means of production", in spite of the illusion of popular control. Artists in the US who originated those forms of theatre gave them up precisely because they realized they were oppressing rather than liberating audiences' (Ibid.44). Fourth, George claims that 'Boal has always maintained the sanctity of the theatre in his regular theatre productions, from the 1950s to the present time' (Ibid.).

Some of the questions raised by George can also be turned to the Nepali context. However, not all Theatre of the Oppressed-based performances are practiced in the same way by the same classes of artists. Distinctions need to be made. For this reason, I will outline in a summary the 'conditions of performance' of the theatrical experiences described in this thesis: Aarohan *loktantrik natak*, *kachahari natak* (workshop-based), *kachahari natak* (issue-based) and Maoist theatre. I will then compare them with the *kachahari natak* practiced by Kamlari Natak Samuha and the Forum

Theatre of Jana Sanskriti. I have considered pre-performance issues (nos. 1-2 in table 6.1), performance (nos. 3-4) and post-performance (no. 5-9).

The Kamlari Natak Samuha is a Tharu activist theatre group based and performing in Dang-Deukhuri Valley (see Chapter four, section 4.1.a). As mentioned in Chapter four, the only topic the group performs about is the *kamlari pratha*. The artists in the group, in fact, are former *kamlaris* who were rescued from city employment and exploitation and helped to return to school. They perform in particular during school holidays and intensify their work in the end of the year as Magh 1st (middle of January) is the date of Maghe Sakranti, the most important Tharu cultural festival (marking the beginning of Tharu new year) on which time most of the agreements between landlords/middlemen and girls families are completed. The plays are performed in villages, during *melas* or in association with rallies and mass meetings organized by the NGO. The group is associated to a grass-root NGO, SWAN (Social Welfare Action Nepal) founded ten years earlier by a group of Tharu students committed to tackle their community's problem, and several INGOs (FNC and PLAN-Nepal). The director of the group and also the vice-president of SWAN, Dhaniram Chaudhary, is himself the son of a former *kamlari* and a farmer by profession. The group has been trained by Aarohan and from time to time invited to Kathmandu with other partner groups for trainings. As part of the partnership commitment with MS Nepal to bring a local group perform in Kathmandu, Kamlari Natak Samuha rehearsed with Aarohan for a month and then performed a play for Kathmandu audiences in 2005 (see Chapter four, section 4.1.a). Because the group is closely associated with the NGOs programmes, in the post-performance parents can be counselled and persuaded not to send their daughters away.¹⁶⁶ At the time of my fieldwork, the NGO provided a piglet or a goat for the families who kept their daughters at home or accepted them back, to support them; simultaneously, the girls' mothers are involved in micro-credit activities. The value of the piglet - NRs. 4,000-5,000 - corresponds to the annual sum the parents would get from the landlord/middlemen had they sent their daughter as *kamlari*. Moreover, the NGO provides supports for the girls' education in the village through scholarships, stationary, uniforms, etc, according to the family needs. The NGOs also carried out awareness raising activities such as the formation of kids clubs to increase the interaction among the rescued girls and strengthen their relationship; the Kamlari Abolition Committee comprising local leaders, intellectuals and parents of the *kamlaris* who are responsible for organizing meetings to convince the local people against the system; they monitor the scholarships and income generating activities and provide legal aid for former *kamlari* girls victims of violence.

¹⁶⁶ During the period of my fieldwork in Dang-Deukhuri (August 2005 and January 2006) the area was under the control of the Maoist government. How SWAN negotiated with the Maoist the space for continuing their programmes is worth another paper for detail description.

	Aarohan loktantrik	Aarohan Kachahari/ws	Aarohan Kachahari/ls	Maoist theatre	Kamlari Kachahari	Jana Sanskriti FT
1.WORKSHOP	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES
2.TOPICALITY	YES	YES	YES/NO	YES	YES	YES
3.SPECTATOR'S AGENCY DURING PERFORMANCE	NO	YES: on the critical moment when the play is stopped by the <i>sutradhar</i>	YES: on the critical moment when the play is stopped by the <i>sutradhar</i>	NO	YES: on the critical moment when the play is stopped by the <i>sutradhar</i>	YES: the frame is played twice; the spect-actor can stop the action any time during the second round
4. REPETITION IN SAME COMMUNITY	NO; it's repeated during other political programmes	NO	NO	NO; it repeated during other political programmes	YES/NO but the district where they perform is well defined and they can go back to the same village	YES: monthly
5. LOCATION & CONTEXT	Citizen-led social movement mass meetings	Created for a performance	Created for a performance	People's War and political mass meetings	Created for a performance	Village where the theatre teams live
6.FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES	Not by theatre group but the movement continues	Not by theatre group; dependent on community members	NO	Artists are party members, both artists and activists	By NGOs linked to the theatre group	YES
7. MEMBERSHIP	YES: artists participated as citizens	NO: no connection between artists & audience	NO: no connection between artists & audience	YES: similar ideology and background	YES: same ethnic group, community and background	YES: same village
8. DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT	OCCASIONAL	PART-TIME	PART-TIME	FULL TIME	PART-TIME	FULL TIME
9. FUNDING	VOLUNTARY	INGO	INGO	PARTY	INGO	COMMUNITY

Table 6.1: The conditions of performance

If we consider the group's *kachahari*, despite the frame is not scripted during workshops with the audience, the artists themselves have lived the experiences they perform about, much like the Maoist cultural workers. Moreover, the group performs in Tharu language; the songs and dances portraying the girls' experiences as *kamlaris* belong to the Tharu tradition. The group also wear Tharu traditional dresses, thus objectifying their identity while challenging this cultural practice. The topicality therefore is enhanced by personal experience, like in the Maoist performances. Moreover, the artists are members of the local community where they performed: both Dhaniram (theatre group director, actor, and vice-president of SWAM) and Krishna Chaudhary (president of SWAN and principal of a local government school) are well known and trusted leaders of the area. The follow-up activities and programmes organized by the NGOs linked to the group provide the link between the different world rehearsed onstage and the possibility of actualizing it in real life.

I have already introduced the work of Jana Sanskriti in Chapter one, section 2.3. Mohan extremely interesting research (2004a; 2004b; N.A.) has outlined the peculiarity of the group's organization and interpretation of Forum Theatre. The rationale guiding the project is that 'theatre is not enough' to achieve social transformation. For this reason, the group based their organization on 'deep and long-term involvement in rural communities' (Mohan N.A.). As Mohan describes (Ibid.):

Jana Sanskriti is composed of three urban, middle-class members¹⁶⁷ and 350 agricultural and wage labourers who have committed themselves to the task of representation for the past 18 years. Jana Sanskriti's rural members come from landless to middle-class and low-to middle-class families. They have an approximately equal number of (predominantly Hindu) men and women. Together they share the task of playing scripts and scripting plays for the stage, and challenging power relations offstage.

Each of Jana Sanskriti teams integrates theatre onstage (rehearsals, workshops, enactment of plays organization of cultural festivals) with activism offstage (calling for meetings and discussions, brainstorming sessions, 'ideological training'): 'through these two practices, over time the theatre teams come to constitute nodes of cultural and political activism and representation in villages' (Ibid.)

One question that may arise is that the aesthetic quality of the Forum Theatre offered by professional artists like Aarohan is much higher than that offered by activist groups like Kamlari Natak Samuha or the Maoist artists. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Mottin 2010), playing onstage a script that re-enacts moments of artists' personal life, as in the case of the *kamlari* or Maoist artists,

¹⁶⁷ Of the seven leaders of Jana Sanskriti, three come from urban, middle-class background, four are from rural, agricultural backgrounds (Ibid.)

embues the performance of a power and strength that purely 'representational' may not have. It was such 'aesthetic power' rather than 'aesthetic skill' that attracted me at first to Maoist theatre. Mohan remarks that what makes the difference in the stories scripted by Jana Sanskriti was the fieldwork and the direct knowledge of particular stories of marginalization. Julian Boal thus comment on Jana Sanskriti's aesthetic appeal (Mohan *ibid.*):

I feel aesthetics in not only putting a flower in a vase, and a nice light in it. If it is aesthetic it is because it is strong and there is something behind it.

I think the 'something behind' that makes the difference between performance as representation and performance as a performative act is the artists' real life that is enacted on stage. The power behind the performances of artists from Jana Sanskriti, Kamlari Natak Samuha, Maoist cultural groups, and as well as Aarohan *loktantrik natak* lies in the fact that while onstage, they were rehearsing for their own lives. Similarly, Aarohan Theatre artists also rehearsed for their own lives, not on the *kachahari* but on the proscenium stage.

3. Conclusion

All spirits occupy the middle ground between humans and gods. As mediators between the two, they fill the remaining space, and so make the universe an interconnected whole.

(Plato cited in Lids 2006:114)

I started my argument *in media res*, with the description of Emergency 2005 and the autocratic space that returned in Nepal once again. Artists have been described as space-brokers, but they are not at all neutral, rather they are 'political space brokers'. In fact, space has emerged as an important analytic in order to understand how theatre can question and tackle social and political problems. The aesthetic space is a liminal space, the space of the 'I-not I', of the 'magic if' (Chapter one) where transformation of the social reality can start by triggering imagination. Plato's notion of 'middle ground' is similar to Boal's idea of *metaxis* that he describes as:

The state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image. The participant shares and belongs to these two autonomous worlds; their reality and the image of their reality, which she herself has created (1995:43).

For this reason, '[p]articipant and audience belong completely to both these worlds. Through the process of *metaxis* theatre becomes the space for interplay between the actual and the imagined, the tangible and the ephemeral' (Linds, 2006:114). My fieldwork experience has revealed how the world of reality and that of representation are not autonomous at all. It is their interconnectivity that makes the aesthetic space a political space, neither neutral nor 'safe' but exactly for this reason a space of possible transformation and change. Keeping up the link between the worlds of fiction and reality has emerged as a key factor to allow for the world imagined onstage to be scripted in real life. The post-performance link can be provided by follow-up activities: for example, the workers union in the case narrated by Bikhram, social work carried out by Suresh after the play in the slum (see Chapter four, section 4.3.f), the NGO and their programmes in the case of Kamlari Natak Samuha, actors counselling the spectators and suggesting which organizations to contact in the case of the Cardboard Citizen experience (Ibid.), the social movement in the case of *loktantrik natak*, the Maoist party and the revolution in the case of Maoist performances.

Burghart (1996) explained that in hierarchical societies, moral authority conditions the possibility of being heard (Chapter two). The way in which theatre was used both in the 1980s and in the period of my fieldwork showed how the ambiguity of the aesthetic space created by theatre provided the moral space in which political criticism could be vented out, a space for collective agency. Ambiguity safeguarded the political message and allowed criticism. But danger coexisted with ambiguity: the tales of artistic disguise from the Rana period (Chapter two) to Aarohan performances in Basantapur Square in 2006 (Chapter three) are tales of fear and sometimes oppression when the cover was blown away.

'Believing', 'identifying' with a performance requires a choice, triggering agency from the audience. Theatrical performances provide 'absences', 'gaps', 'fractures', 'ruptures', and 'discontinuities' that allow the audience to feel the need, desire, tension or hope to overcome them in real life. In this way the new can enter the social imagination and spur social creativity and action (Hastrup 2004). Creativity is defined as an activity that produces something new through the recombination and transformation of existing cultural practices (Liep, 2001:2). Chantal Mouffe (2002:124) strongly argues that what moves people and sustains political struggles are not only interests or rationality but what she calls 'passions,' that is fantasies and desires regarding their social world. Moreover, she asserts the need for political theory to recognize a 'mobilization of passion'. Desire is born of absence (Hastrup 2004:43) and has been defined as a 'dramaturgical force' (Margolin cited in Dolan 2005:56). Hope (Zournazi 2002) has been conceptualized as a powerful force in bringing about change. Zournazi claims that hope may be that 'force which keeps us

moving and changing — the renewal of life at each moment, or the re-enchanting of life and politics — so that the future may be about how we come to live and hope in the present' (Ibid. 274).

The potentially transformative power of performance can be perceived from different points of view. Turner stresses the 'revelatory function' of performance: 'man is a self-performing animal — his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself' (cited in Carlson 2008:8). Holding a 'pragmatic and utilitarian stance', Beeman stresses the 'achievement of specific pragmatic goals' and equates 'transformational' with 'the effective': 'As a transformational force, performance behaviour has the power to restructure the social order through the persuasive power of rhetoric and through the power of redefinition of both audience and context' (cited in Carlson 2008:9). Conversely, both Dolan (2005) and Fischer-Lichte (2008) emphasize the co-creative process in which performers and audience are 'mutually involved in an ongoing dynamic of the fulfilment of the process of life and consciousness, not under the control of either' (Carlson 2008:9). Dolan calls 'utopian performatives' those 'small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense' (2005:5). Fisher-Lichte calls the 'sudden deeper insight into the shared process of being in the world' (Carlson 2008:9), 'moments of enchantment'. Gell (1992:43) recognizes that arts are 'components of a vast and often unrecognized technical system, essential to the reproduction of human societies' identified as a 'technology of enchantment'.

My fieldwork experience shows that under certain conditions the power of enchantment could challenge political power and that cultural performances are important junctures where to investigate cultural creativity in transitional periods.

Studying performance also challenges the ethnographer and research methodology. Castaneda talks about the 'invisible theatre of ethnography' and the '(im)possibility of rendering, not only ethical dilemmas but this invisibility of fieldwork, into transparency' (2006:82). He introduces the idea of 'emergent audience' upon which participant observation is built as '[t]he audience of fieldwork is not an audience because there is no performance presented to it via the explicit staging of a fieldwork as performance. Rather, there is an enactment that engages an audience, which is also invisible, with the performativity of its own participation in the theatre of everyday life' (Ibid. 83). Castaneda also adds that 'the assumption governing successful grant writing, IRB evaluation, and defense of dissertations is that the researcher determines, controls and imposes not only the definition of the research project but designates who is involved as subjects of research. Thus, the on-the-ground flux and contingency of emergent audience in immersive ethnography tends to be

erased'. My dissertation instead, joins a growing number of works based on 'indeterminacy' (Ibid) as a principle of fieldwork and as an inevitable but precious research tool.

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